Native plants help create a little piece of history in your own yard.

Go Native

Brilliant orange and true to its name, butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) is a great addition to mesic prairie gardens.

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Using native grasses and flowering plants (forbs) in residential and commercial landscaping, though not a new concept, is a growing trend today, particularly in Midwestern states where these types of plants once dominated the landscape.

One of the first questions those contemplating such a landscape plan often ask is: "What species do I use and how will they look?" A fair question, considering that aesthetics plays a key role in almost any landscaping we undertake.

Numerous sources, both in print and on the Internet, provide information on how to successfully establish a prairie planting. In his publication "*Prairie Establishment and Landscaping,*" Bill McClain, long-time Department of Natural Resources biologist and noted Illinois naturalist, highlights several important features to consider when choosing species for your prairie landscaping: Plant height, blooming time, flower color, leaf size and shape, fragrance, fall color, stem color, fruit color and shape, attractiveness to insects, flower color variations, and leaf textures. Taking a little time to carefully select species based on these factors can result in a planting that contains complimentary colors, heights and textures throughout the growing season, and allows a diversity of animals to benefit year-round from the planting.

Grasses

In this author's opinion, most areas landscaped with native plants should contain some native grasses. Most grass species are available for reasonable prices and can be obtained from a large number of suppliers. They also tend to be easy to maintain once established. A good stand of grass in a landscape planting provides forbs with extra "standability," preventing them from

drooping to the ground under the weight of their flowering heads.

Many native grasses display colors and textures which change as the seasons progress, adding aesthetic value to the planting. For example, big bluestem turns varying shades of purple in the fall, while little bluestem takes on a brilliant russet color. One color form of little bluestem, in particular, also is showy during the early stages of the growing season, displaying a silvery sheen.

A major aspect of grasses to take into account is plant height. Species such as big bluestem and Indian grass can easily achieve heights of 4-6 feet, or more, which must be allowed for when considering how to best display all species in the planting. Little bluestem normally reaches heights of 3 feet or less, while others, such as northern dropseed, display a growth form like a low water fountain and normally do not exceed 1 foot in height.

Using grasses may not be possible in some areas, however. For instance, areas immediately adjacent to a home, business or utilities, where maintenance with fire would be unduly dangerous, should not be planted heavily with grass.

Diversify your garden with interesting grasses, such as side-oats gramma (*Bouteloua curtipedula*), and tall spikes of blue lobelia (*Lobelia siphbilitica*).

Forbs

The incredible diversity of native flowering plants (forbs) provides almost limitless landscaping choices. However, as opposed to grasses, some forbs can be tricky to find and others are quite expensive.

Although purple-flowered spiderworts (*Tradescantia ohiensi*) are the most common, a white form also exists.

Reading material

William McClain's "Prairie Landscaping and Establishment" (Natural Heritage Technical Publication No. 2. Division of Natural Heritage, Department of Natural Resources, Springfield) provides historical perspectives regarding Illinois prairies and contains detailed and valuable information concerning procedures for establishing prairie landscapes, including a list of vendors for prairie plant materials and a chart displaying important plant characteristics. The document is available at www.dnr.state.il.us/conservation/naturalheritage/prairie/table.htm, or can be ordered from the DNR Clearinghouse at www.dnr.state.il.us/publications/index.htm.

Also available from the Clearinghouse to download or order is the "Butterfly Gardens" pamphlet.

These publication, and others like them, can be invaluable resources in creating some Illinois history in one's own backyard.

Smaller plantings are best established using potted plants or rootstock, which results in faster establishment time and allows the plants to be placed in the desired location. Additionally, when using potted plants or rootstock, plant survival often is greater than when using seed. Most gardeners of the backyard variety are advised to use potted plants or rootstock for most plantings.

On the other hand, if one is planting a larger area, seed use can be advantageous due to lowered cost per unit area and greatly decreased labor input. Who wants to dig hundreds (or maybe thousands) of holes in which to place plants when a broadcast seeder simplifies bigger jobs?

Deciding which species to use may be difficult since the choices are so numerous and so many species will offer great eye appeal. McClain suggests conducting research into the types of prairies that would have inhabited your local area and then using species that mimic these historical grasslands. While not mandatory in any way, this method allows you to "recreate history," in that your landscaping can actually reflect the way your local area may have looked hundreds of years ago.

Recommended plants for a dry prairie border

Aromatic sumac	*Rhus aromatica*
Side-oats grama	*Bouteloua curtipedula*
Rigid goldenrod	*Solidago rigida*
Indian grass	*Sorghastrum nutans*
Black chokeberry	*Aronia melanocarpa*
Poppy mallow	*Callirhoe triangulata*
Sand love grass	*Eragrostis trichodes*
Western sunflower	*Heliathus occidentalis*
Little bluestem	*Schizachyrium scoparium*
Lance-leaved coreopsis	*Coreopsis lanceolata*
Lead plant	*Amorpha canescens*
Dwarf blazing star	*Liatris cylindracea*
Silky aster	*Aster sericeus*
Birds foot violet	*Viola pedata*
Goats rue	*Tephrosia virginiana*
Plains prickly pear	*Opuntia macrorbiza*

Recommended plants for a wet prairie border

Red osier dogwood	*Cornus stolonifera*
Indigo bush	*Amorpha fruticosa*
Cord grass	*Spartina pectinata*
Swamp milkweed	*Asclepias incarnata*
Gama grass	*Tripsacum dactyloides*
Wild iris	*Iris shrevei*
Meadow sweet	*Spirea alba*
Blue lobelia	*Lobelia siphilitica*
Turtlehead	*Chelone glabra*
Flat-topped aster	*Aster umbellatus*

Recommended plants for a mesic prairie border

Shooting star	*Dodecatheon meadia*
Hazelnut	*Corylus virginiana*
Rattlesnake master	*Eryngium yucciolium*
Black-eyed Susan	*Rudbeckia hirta*
Prairie rose	*Rosa setigera*
Alum root	*Heuchera richardsonii*
Spiderwort	*Tradescantia obiensis*
Pasture rose	*Rosa carolina*
Big bluestem	*Andropogon gerardii*
Butterfly weed	*Asclepias tuberosa*
New England aster	*Aster novae-angliae*
Pale purple coneflower	*Echinacea pallida*
Blazing star	*Liatris aspera*
Northern dropseed	*Sporobolus heterolepsis*
Prairie willow	*Salix humilis*
Indian grass	*Sorbastrum nutans*
Prairie smoke	*Geum triflorum*
Cream false indigo	*Baptisia leucophaea*
Lily	*Lilium michiganense*

Abundant resources exist that provide information on creating and maintaining prairie plantings of any type (wet, wet-mesic, dry, etc.)—what species to use; how to plant and when; use of fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, fire, etc. Regardless of the decisions made concerning species composition, give considerable thought to the look and functionality of the plantings. For instance, one can plan the blooming times of forbs such that some species is in flower at all times of the growing season. Without this level of forethought, it is very easy to end up with a native garden that is extremely showy

The yucca-like leaves and unique flowers of rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) provide visual interest.

during the summer, yet almost barren of flowers during the late spring and fall. When the latter case occurs, the avian and insect use of the plantings will decrease.

Think Native

Native gardens are advantageous for many reasons, but chief among these for many home and business owners is the fact that, once established, native plants require little to no direct care.

The vast majority of native species are perennials and do not require replanting from year to year. Even those that are biennial or annual in

There are approximately 1,100,000 seeds in a pound of New England aster (*Aster novae-angliae*).

nature often can re-seed themselves quite successfully in sparser designs (though they may tend to disappear over time in more diverse and heavy plantings). Additionally, most native species, with the exception of those specifically adapted to wet habitats, can withstand long periods of drought and require little or no watering.

Save yourself some time and money when planning your landscaping this year.

Go native.

Plant height: Shorter prairie plants generally flower in the spring, with mid-height plants blooming mid-summer and tall prairie grasses and sunflowers providing color in the fall.
Blooming time: The progression of blooms runs from April and through September.
Flower color: The more common colors are white, pink, blue, yellow and lavender, with red and orange not nearly as common. Some prairie wildflowers show considerable variation in flower color, such as butterfly weed (butter-yellow color to deep orange) and spiderwort, blazing star and pale purple coneflower which have purple and white forms.
Leaf size, shape and texture: Leaves range from large (prairie dock) to highly dissected (compass plant) to yucca-like (rattlesnake master) and filmy (Illinois bundle flower). Some prairie plant leaves are rough (wild quinine, rosin weed and prairie dock) while others are delicate (Illinois bundle flower and prairie clover) or sharp (rattlesnake master and slough grass).
Fragrance: Select plants for their fragrant flowers (pasture rose), seeds (prairie clover and northern dropseed) or leaves (goldenrod, rosinweed and bee balm).
Fall color: Grasses (big and little bluestem, Indian, cord and grama grasses) have striking fall color, as do the shrubs black chokeberry, hazelnut and smooth and winged sumac.
Stem color: The stems of hazelnut and red osier dogwood provide a colorful contrast to the winter landscape.
Fruit color and shape: Fruits can range in color from deep purple (black chokeberry) to red (rose hips) to white (red osier dogwood). The fruits of the bundle flower are like crinkled potato chips.
Attractiveness to insects: Butterflies and other insects are attracted to a number of prairie plants, including coneflowers, blazing stars and goldenrods.