

SEEDS OF DIVERSITY



Photo by MJ Hatfield

Iowa DNR Prairie Resource Center

December 2009

Landscaping with Prairie

Are you looking for something to brighten up your flower garden? Looking to the prairie may be the answer. Some prairie species do well in a landscape setting. A few prairie species have already made the cut and have limited availability in garden centers around Iowa. Species such as Butterfly milkweed, Purple coneflower, and a newcomer Prairie dropseed are available, but are there other species that are diamonds in the rough.

Prairie species have many advantages over other nonnative species. Prairie species are drought-tolerant, need little to no fertilizer, and are a great attractor of native butterflies and other wildlife. Butterfly milkweed is probably the best example of this. It has a long tap root that allows it to survive in drought situations, its blossom is a great attractor of butterflies, and is the host plant for the monarch butterfly.

What makes a good landscaping plant? In addition to the positive traits that I have listed above, landscaping plants need to have disease resistance, good color (quick and extended flowering is beneficial), and good behavior (not becoming weedy).

I think there are many other undiscovered prairie species that would make good landscaping plants. I will start with species such as Prairie smoke, Blue-eyed grass, Purple prairie clover, and Alum root,

In this edition:

Page 1. **Landscaping with Prairie**

Page 3. **Plant Iowa Initiative**

Page 4. **Species Spotlight:
Prairie's Hedgehog**

Page 6. **Prairie Winter Storm**



Prairie Smoke in a rock garden

which are all smaller prairie species that would make good rock garden plants. These are all perennial species that will persist through time without becoming weedy.

Prairie smoke has a unique bloom as well as seed that would provide color and interest to the garden for an extended spring. Prairie smoke has a bright red blossom that flowers in late May to early June. After flowering, the Prairie smoke forms a feather-like plume that wafts in the wind, which is also attractive. This species likes mesic to moist soil and is found in the north-east part of Iowa.

Blue-eyed grass is a member of the iris family that blooms in May or June. The bright flowers resemble blue eyes with a twinkle of yellow in the center. This small (6-10 inches at full height) and delicate prairie plant will grow from seed as well as from vegetative bulbs. Once established it can easily be divided and moved to other spots in the garden. This species thrives when there is little to no competition; this is similar to where it is found in the prairie on dry, sandy or gravel hill-sides throughout Iowa.

Purple prairie clover is another small prairie species that does well in a garden setting. This small prairie plant can provide some July and August color to the landscape around your house. The bright purple bloom progresses from the bottom of the stem to the top providing an extended blooming period. Purple prairie clover is an excellent butterfly attractor with its late summer color. The seed germinates easily with scarification (scratching of the seed surface) and blooms sometimes with one year's growth. Purple prairie clover has a natural distribution statewide in Iowa.



Blue-eyed grass and Wood betony

Photo by MJ Hatfield



Purple prairie clover



Alum root

Alum root is already seen in some form in landscape settings. Heuchera (cultivars of Alum root) has been cultivated into a landscaping plant already. The Iowa native provides slightly less color with its whitish green flowers, versus pink-red of the cultivar, but still makes an excellent landscaping plant. The foliage also makes this plant attractive to the eye as it turns bronze or burgundy in late summer. Alum root can be found throughout Iowa.

Do you have any species that you like in the landscape around your house? I have just touched on a few small species that would make a great addition to your landscaping, but there are many other excellent candidates. Prairie species are very “green” because they need very little water or fertilizer. Look to the prairie for that unique flower to add to your landscape.

Plant Iowa Native Initiative

March of 2009 the staff of Iowa Crop Improvement Association (ICIA) and the Tallgrass Prairie Center (TPC) met to discuss the possibility of launching a Plant Iowa Natives campaign in the state. The discussion centered on the possibility of building on the state’s current resources of educators, growers, botanists, etc. in such a way to expand the knowledge and use of native Iowa seed and plant materials in the state.

Subsequently in May of 2009 a group of individuals and companies with an appreciation for the native grasses, wildflowers, shrubs, and trees which once populated much of Iowa met to discuss a promotional effort to grow native Iowa plant materials. After further assistance from the UNI Business Development and Incubation Center it was decided to pursue a statewide Plant Iowa Natives campaign with a focus in 3 areas:

Image – improve education and awareness of native species

Sales – improve linkages between buyers and sellers

Environment – improve water quality and wildlife habitat

From this initial meeting blossomed a series of meetings to gauge the interest and scope of a campaign. Meetings during the summer and fall of 2009 of individuals and companies with an appreciation for the native grasses, wildflowers, shrubs, and trees established a definite interest in the concept. The following mission statement was developed:

To encourage, educate, and create awareness of native plants.

Plans are underway to launch a website for this effort in 2010 and to seek funding to support development of educational materials, a distribution network, and a marketing campaign. To receive more information or to join the campaign contact Eileen Wuebker with ICIA at 515-294-0546 or Greg Houseal with TPC at 319-273-3005.

Species Spotlight: Prairie's Hedgehog



What? A hedgehog in the prairie? Well, not exactly. *Echinacea pallida*, Pale purple coneflower, or Spiny Norman as named by personnel from North Central Correctional Facility gets its name from echinos or hedgehog because of its spiny center cone that remains long after the flower has dissipated for the year. This native perennial can be found in medium-to-well drained soils in areas with partial-to-full sun across Iowa.

Distinguishing characteristics include its pale, purple-pink petals and spiny, knob-like center cone. In addition, it has narrow, toothless parallel-veined leaves that are from 4 to 10 inches long.



Pale purple coneflower

Wildlife uses this plant for a nectar and food source. Pale purple coneflowers are common nectar plants for many butterflies, moths and other insects. They have pale, purple-pink flowers from mid-June to July in Iowa. In the fall, goldfinches can often be seen feeding on the seeds in the spiny center cone that remains. Seed heads remain intact for most of the winter season providing food for additional species during the winter months.

Iowa is in the NW corner of the range of Pale purple coneflower, ranging from Texas to Quebec, Canada and east to Georgia and Maine. This prairie flower loves fire. During the season after fire, this plant flowers profusely. In years without fire, blooms will be decreased to 10 percent of the plants. Finding this plant in a remnant that has not been burned may lead to a hillside of blooms if fire is added to management of the prairie. In cultivation this does not seem to be the case with the plant flowering yearly.

Propagation of this species can be done easily by seed. Seed needs to be stratified for 60-90 days prior to germination. Stratification can be done by mixing 1 part seed to 2 parts sand into a baggie. Water is added to the mixture and placed into a refrigerator for 60-90 days. This species benefits greatly from dormant seeding from November- March.

Pale purple coneflower, Spiny Norman, Prairie hedgehogs, or whatever nickname you would like to give this plant, is a unique part of the diverse prairie that encompasses Iowa. This native perennial will add early color to your prairie, attract many butterflies, and provide a food source for wildlife. Discover Pale purple coneflower on your next visit to the prairie.



Prairie Winter Storm



Stiff Goldenrod after 12 inches of snow

Walking through the prairie after a December snow storm makes you wonder how anything survived in this snow burdened world. The huge drift of snow seems insurmountable when first entering the prairie grassland, but after the snow drift work-out, the prairie springs to life.

Once past the exterior drift ringed prairie the rugged workout becomes a comparative winter stroll. This is where the prairie comes alive. Suddenly, a rooster pheasants bolts from beneath my feet from his winter home of snow laden native grass. A look a little further into the grassland shows a pair of Dark-eyed juncos darting from the snow, picking up Prairie sunflower seed that were prairie blossoms just a few months early. Another scan with my eyes shows a vole has been in the vicinity, but now hides beneath the snow cover out of sight of the passing Northern harrier. A little further exploration of this prairie shows a fox trotted through the patch of

prairie last night searching for some winter food, maybe a deer mouse, cottontail, or vole. A wise prairie buck stays concealed in his prairie hiding spot escaping view of the group of deer hunters passing through the nearby timber. His coat matches perfectly with the bluestem



Fox track in the snow

Remnants of a rodent meal unfinished in the snow



Indian grass and Sawtooth sunflower seed left in the snow were attractive meal for the Junco's

keeping him concealed with a natural camouflage. I come out to the road again tired and weary from my winter hike, but fascinated by the wildlife that was concealed in the prairie grassland.

Driving by on the road a person may think that a prairie is vacant of life, but a winter walk through the prairie provides evidence that they are missing the wildlife as they pass from a distance. Winter is a great time to discover, so get out explore your favorite prairie. The outdoors is a great place for yearlong explorations.

Changes! Did you notice that there was no fall edition of the Seeds of Diversity? Unfortunately due to loss of temporary help and a difficult harvest season we were not able to create a fall edition. In the future we will try to have a bi-annual edition of the newsletter. We intend to have a spring-summer edition in June-July and a Fall/winter edition in November-December. Thanks for your patience and I hope you enjoy this edition.

Federal regulations prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex or handicap. State law prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, national origin, or disability. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility as described above, or if you desire further information, please write to the Iowa DNR, Wallace State Office Building, 502 E. Ninth St., Des Moines, Iowa, 50319.