

Preparation, Planting, & Care of Prairie Wildflowers & Grasses

WHEN TO PLANT

During normal weather years, the ideal planting time for most prairie species in Iowa is May 15 to June 15. Depending on the weather, prairie species may be planted from May 1 to July 10. Earlier plantings may suffer from too much competition from cool season weeds. Later plantings may not have time to establish sufficient root systems to keep them from winter killing.

Fall dormant seedings can also be made in circumstances warrant. One advantage of all dormant seeding is a much higher percentage of forb seed germination the following spring due to natural *over wintering*. This *over wintering* increases forb seed germination by exposing the seed to a natural stratification process. Another reason for a fall dormant seeding is anticipation that the site will be too wet to plant in the following spring.

We recommend the following steps in making a fall dormant seeding:

1. Prepare the ground as you would for a spring planting.
2. On September 15 sow a cover crop of oats or annual rye (2 bushels per acre).
3. Do NOT sow native prairie species until approximately October 15 or the anticipated time of the first autumn frost. You do not want the prairie seeds to germinate, as they will not have sufficient time to establish well enough to keep from winter killing.

SITE PREPARATION

Two factors that will help ensure the success of your prairie planting are 1) the elimination of as much weedy competition as possible, and 2) a firm hard seed bed for good seed-to-soil contact.

Elimination of weedy competition is achieved by tillage or the use of short duration herbicides such as Roundup. The tillage method involves plowing the site (fall plowing is recommended for non-erodible sites); disking the site in the spring once each week for three weeks; harrowing; and then culti-packing or rolling the site once before planting and once after planting to create a firm seed bed. (A firm seed bed should not leave a footprint when you walk on it.)

The use of short duration herbicides, such as Roundup, is recommended in place of the tillage method when the planting site is highly erodible. The use of these herbicides should be applied following label directions, just prior to planting with a no till range drill or by hand seeding. It is unnecessary to firm the seed bed when using this method.

The same two site preparation methods can be used on smaller sites; however, your tillage and packing equipment for smaller site may differ. The objectives are the same, however: 1) elimination of weedy competition, and 2) a firm seed bed to provide good seed to soil contact.

PLANTING

Large prairie plantings should be made using a range drill designed to handle a wide variety of prairie species seed. Smaller plantings can be hand broadcast.

Seed of most species should be sown in a depth of ¼ to ½ inch. If you are drilling your site, just before drilling the site, you should hand sow small seed or seed that needs light to germinate.

SEEDING RATE

Seeding rates vary greatly according to 1) method of planting (broadcast rates are higher), 2) erodibility of the site, and 3) the size of the seed (prairie species seeds vary greatly in size), and 4) your planting goal.

We will be happy to answer questions about seeding rates over the phone or consult with you in person should the situation warrant.

CARE AFTER PLANTING

Seeds of all kinds need water to germinate. During normal years, watering is not necessary. However, in dry years, it may be necessary to water, if possible. A good soaking of about ½ inch of water once a week may be necessary in dry years. Excessive watering may encourage weedy competition.

Most prairie species establish themselves slowly, putting most of their energy into underground root growth the first year. Too much weedy competition can shade the prairie plants and compete for available water and nutrients.

A variety of methods can be used to control weedy competition. On smaller site you can hand weed the site. This involves the recognition of weeds as well as prairie plants. On larger sites, mowing is recommended during the first year. It may be necessary to mow several times during the establishment year. Mowing should be done at a height of 10 – 12 inches if possible, or at a height just above the height of most prairie plants. Mowing should be done with a rotary or flail type mower that chops up the weeds. Never use a sickle bar type of mower that lays the mowed weeds down in a row or pile. This may suffocate and kill many of your young prairie plants.

Broadleaf chemicals such as 2,4D may be used to control broadleaf weeds in prairie grass plantings. Do not use these chemicals if you have made a mixed prairie planting which includes wildflowers. Always follow label directions when using chemicals of any kind.

Timely burning can also be beneficial in helping to control weeds and stimulate your prairie planting. Burning is not recommended on mixed prairie plantings until the second spring after the establishment year. Always check local fire regulations to determine the need for burning permits. Prairies should be burned every 3 to 5 years to stimulate growth and eliminate excessive buildup of plant material. Prairie fires can be very spectacular and dangerous. Firebreaks should be incorporated into the planning of your prairie planting. Always make sure you use the utmost caution in burning your prairie. (Controlled burns can be safe if done correctly and in careful planning for firebreaks, etc precedes the prairie planting.)

Components and/or percentage of the above blend may vary

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