

What to Expect the First Three Years of a New Native Planting

YEAR 1

The first full growing season for a native planting is a lesson in patience. The first plants to pop up will be annual weeds and cover crop (oats or winter wheat). Annual weeds are “disturbance species”. They grow in areas where soil has been exposed and are not a problem once the prairie is established. Cover crop is planted with the native seeds for a few reasons. First, it helps provide a bit of shade to the germinating flowers and grasses so they are not scorched by the sun. They also serve as a form of temporary erosion control while the prairie grasses get established. Cover crop also provides us with an indication of the early success of the planting. If the cover crop grows, the native seed will as well.

Typically the first step in managing a newly planted prairie is to wait until the weeds and/or cover crop grow and then mow the entire site to a height of approximately 4”. A prairie planting is not like a lawn, which needs to be mowed a couple times a week. Young prairies may only need 3-4 mows during the entire growing season. The main goals of mowing are to stop the weeds from producing seed and producing a closed canopy, thereby shading out the young native plants. Mowing too short or too frequently may be detrimental to the establishment of the prairie by drying out the soil and exposing the seedlings to the hot sun. Herbicide is avoided in the first year, since the risk to the growing prairie plants is too great.

Watering is typically not necessary, as the prairie seed will wait until conditions are appropriate to germinate. This may mean that in a summer of little rain and high temperatures native forbs and grasses may not appear until conditions improve.

If they have been seeded, the main flower species present in year 1 will be black-eyed susans. They are a fast-maturing species. Many of the other species of flowers take two or more seasons to mature to the point of flowering. Some yarrow may be present. Prairie grasses spend the majority of their energy the first year putting down the deep root system which makes a prairie so unique. By the end of the season grasses will be visible, but possibly only to those willing to look very closely at the ground for sprigs of grass less than an inch tall.

YEAR 2

During the second growing season, one complete mow may be necessary in early June to address the annual weeds. Following the first mowing, the planting should be allowed to grow, with only spot mowing and spot spraying necessary to control any weedy species. Weeds are still expected, but should not be as prevalent as the first year.

As with the first year, the most prevalent flower species will be black-eyed susans, with yarrow blooming as well. Other forb species will become more evident, though they may not yet bloom. The grasses will continue to grow and will be a larger component to the planting than in the first year. Shortgrass prairies will show the grama grasses, with the little bluestem taking a bit longer to mature. The majority of the grass in the tallgrass prairie will be Canada wild rye. Big bluestem and Indian grass will come along in the third season.

YEAR 3

By the third year, a great reduction in weeds will be evident, though weeds will still exist. Maintenance includes spot mowing and spot spraying for weedy species. By the third year, most of the forb species will be mature enough to flower. The solid splash of color provided by the black-eyed susans in the first couple years will not be present any longer, but will be replaced by a variety of species blooming throughout the year. Prairie grasses will typically be mature enough to produce seed heads.

YEAR 4 and beyond

For the first 7 years, the prairie will continue to mature and change. Grasses will continue to thicken. Some species of flowers will remain in small pockets, while other spread into larger areas of the planting.

Weed control remains important. There are many noxious weeds, such as Canada thistle, that threaten the health and success of prairie plantings. It is important to continue spot treatment so the weeds do not spread. Prescribed burning is another tool that is used to increase the health of the prairie, while helping to control weeds. Prairies are fire-dependent communities and prescribed burns are usually conducted every 3-4 years, beginning the third or fourth spring.

SUMMARY

This provides some guidelines of what to expect in a young prairie planting. Each planting is unique, so timelines may vary. Weather conditions greatly impact the speed at which a prairie matures. Weeds will be present, especially during the first several years. As the prairie grows, the amount of weeds will decline. Routine maintenance is key to the success of the planting. Prairies do not grow overnight. They take years to mature, but each year you will see the prairie grow and change. Be patient and you will be rewarded.