

Starting a backyard prairie

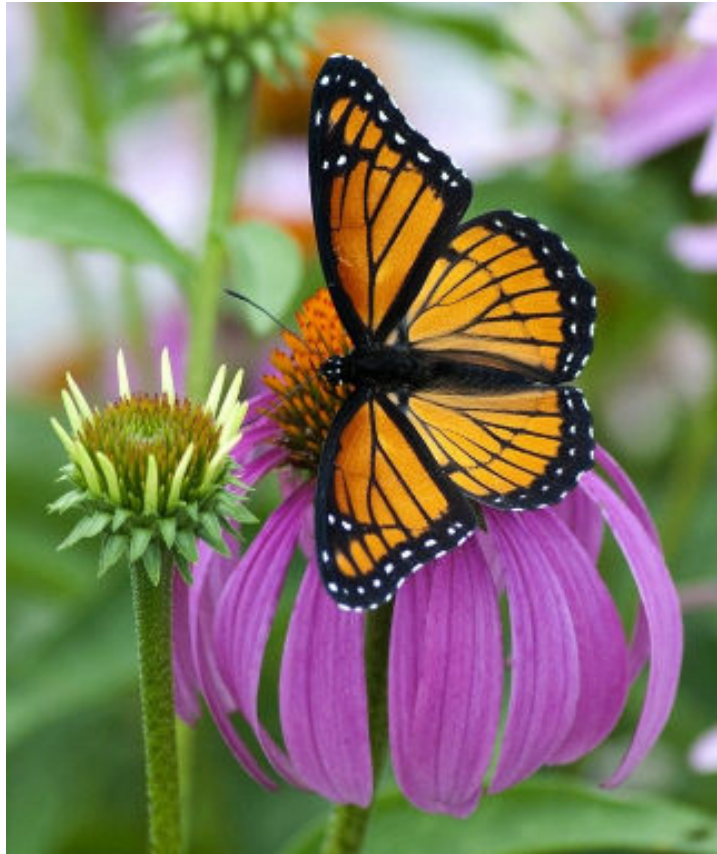
Early fall is the best time to start a wildflower prairie. I know this for a FACT since the best gardener I know sows her wildflower seeds this time of year. You ask, "Who is the best gardener I know?" Her name is Mother Nature, of course.

The wildflowers grown by Mother Nature are now ripening. Soon the seeds in those flowers will drop to the ground. These seeds will germinate next spring.

And I love the idea of starting a wildflower prairie! It reminds me of the old TV show "Little House on the Prairie". Remember? Those were the good old days of TV. If I close my eyes, I can still see little Laura Ingalls running down the hillside with a big smile on her face and a wildflower in her hand. What a happy child she was!

That was a simple, happy life. And I think we can learn a lot from these settlers. Even about lawn care. After all, you never saw Charles Ingalls out there on his noisy, riding lawn mower every weekend. No, he had better things to do, like go fishing with Mr. Edwards or "Half-pint" Laura.

A lot of us are getting tired of mowing our lawns every week-



end. If you are one of these people, consider turning part of your lawn into a prairie. It is easy to take care of, has an everchanging display of beautiful wildflowers, and will attract songbirds!

Successful prairie establishment is not cheap and it's not easy. It requires careful site preparation, improving the soil, and selecting proper plants.

You usually need to start by killing the existing patch of lawn. I recommend using a vegetation killer like Round-Up. Spray the lawn while it's green and growing. About 10 days later the lawn will turn brown. Cultivate the

grass when it dies and prepare a smooth soil bed. Consider working in an inch of compost to enrich the land.

I recommend including some grasses in your wildflower prairie. The grasses will choke out weeds that emerge between the wildflowers, provide physical support for the wildflower stems, and accentuate the beauty of the wildflowers. The golden fall color of grasses can be attractive through the winter months, too.

Select low-growing grasses if you want the wildflowers to be prominent in the prairie. Recommended low-growing grasses include little bluestem, sideoats grama, and prairie dropseed. Low-growing grasses are best for urban landscapes.

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Select tall-growing grasses if your major goal is to attract birds and other wildlife. Such a planting will provide seeds for wildlife in fall, and protective cover from winter through spring. Tall-growing grasses include big bluestem, indiagrass and switchgrass.

Many wildflowers do well in North Dakota. Popular choices include New England aster, white false indigo, ox-eye sunflower, purple and yellow coneflower, prairie blazing star, compass-plant, stiff goldenrod, and black-eyed susan.

There are many sources of wildflower seeds, but two companies are especially noteworthy. Prairie Nursery in Westfield, Wisconsin (www.prairienursery.com) has excellent quality seeds. Their catalog has valuable information available on how to start a prairie. Several Master Gardeners have informed me the customer service of Prairie Moon Nursery in Winona, Minnesota (www.prairiemoon.com) is truly outstanding. 