

CREATING A POCKET PRAIRIE BY SEED

A pocket prairie is a small planting of native grasses and wildflowers that supports pollinators, improves soil health, and requires less long-term maintenance than a traditional lawn. While small prairies take patience to establish, the results are worth the effort.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT LOCATION

Select a sunny spot that receives at least six hours of sunlight per day. Clearly define the area using edging, paths, or borders to distinguish your prairie from surrounding lawn or landscaping. Make sure the space is large enough to support a variety of species, typically no smaller than 100 square feet.

UNDERSTANDING THE “EDGE EFFECT”

Small, residential prairies experience a lot of edge, meaning they are exposed and adjacent to lawns, non-native gardens, and disturbed areas that produce weed seeds. Wind, birds, and foot traffic can easily introduce weeds. Knowing which aggressive weeds are common in your area and learning how to identify them early is helpful for long-term success.

PREPARING THE SEED BED

Proper site preparation reduces weeds, improves seed-to-soil contact, and gives native plants a head start. Because weed seeds, roots, and rhizomes are often abundant in disturbed soils, preparation can take several months or even a full year. Native prairie plants grow slowly above ground during their first year, while weeds grow quickly. Good preparation helps prevent weeds from overwhelming young prairie plants.

There are two common preparation methods for pocket prairies:

Option 1: Solarization

Solarization uses heat and light deprivation to kill existing vegetation

- Lay a dark tarp or clear plastic tightly over the area and secure it.
- Leave it in place for about six months.
- Briefly uncover the area for one-week intervals in mid-June, late July, and mid-September to stimulate weed germination, then re-cover.
- After final removal, lightly disturb the soil to break up dead vegetation.
- Seed shortly before the first snowfall to protect seeds from wildlife.

Option 2: Light Disking

Disking breaks up the soil and root fragments

- Lightly disk or till whenever a new flush of weeds emerges.
- Repeat several times during the growing season.
- Avoid deep tilling, which brings dormant weed seeds to the surface.
- Repeated exposure to sun and frost weakens weed roots and rhizomes.



SEEDING

Once weeds are controlled and excess plant debris is removed, firm the soil surface. A smooth, firm seedbed improves germination.

Drill Seeding

- Uses specialized equipment to place seeds evenly at the correct depth.
- Seeds are placed $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep, depending on size. Small seeds should remain near the surface.
- Efficient and uniform, but requires access to equipment.

Broadcast Seeding

- Seeds are spread by hand or with a handheld spreader.
- Lightly rake seeds into the soil and firm with a roller or cultipacker.
- Best for small areas and low equipment investment.
- Aim for 11–13 pure live seeds per square foot (double this rate where erosion is a concern).
- Maintain a mix of at least 60% grasses and 40% wildflowers.

WHAT TO EXPECT AFTER SEEDING

Year 1: Establishment

- Annual plants may dominate.
- Most perennial plants focus energy on root growth and will not have much aboveground.
- Native grasses may only grow a few inches and typically will not seed.
- Mow several times if weeds begin shading seedlings; always mow above the prairie plants.

Year 2: Growth

- Native grasses begin setting seed.
- Some flowers bloom for the first time.
- Additional seedlings may emerge if conditions improve.

Year 3+: Maintenance

- Prairie plants are established and competitive.
- Consider a prescribed burn (spring or fall); Burning should only be done with experienced professionals.
- Interseed to increase diversity or fill bare areas if needed.

Once established, a prairie requires less water, fewer inputs, and lower maintenance costs than a traditional lawn. It provides habitat for pollinators and birds, improves soil health, and adds seasonal beauty to your landscape.

