

Native Landscaping

... builds soil quality and enhances the landscape

What are native plants?

Native plants are plants that grew naturally in the pre-settlement tallgrass prairies of Iowa. Tallgrass prairie developed in Iowa more than 10,000 years ago, after the retreat of glaciers. This ecosystem included grasses, flowering plants, insects, and other animals adapted to survive a wide range of conditions ranging from hot and dry to moist and boggy. Nearly all of the tallgrass prairie disappeared because of the growth of agricultural production.

What is native landscaping?

Native landscaping is a simple way to reincorporate native grasses, flowers, shrubs and trees into the landscape. Native forbs, or flowers, bloom throughout the season and attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Hardy native grasses provide golden color for fall and winter appeal.

Once established, natives are easy to maintain because they are adapted to Iowa temperatures and rainfall patterns. They also resist local pests and disease. Native plants reduce soil erosion, build soil structure, and infiltrate rainfall.



Native grasses and plants show their fall colors in this urban landscape in eastern Iowa.



Native flowers show their summer colors.

IDAL-DSC Photo

How do I incorporate native plants?

Native plantings can be established from seed or young plants, or plugs. Plugs are best for residential areas because they are easier to establish and maintain. Plants can be incorporated to an existing garden bed or a new bed can be made by removing sod and loosening the soil.

In residential areas, it is usually best to use short native plants to create an aesthetically pleasing landscape. Native prairie plants can be located anywhere in a sunny landscape. They can be intermingled in more formal beds and borders or create a natural prairie garden. A turf border should be left to define the area or provide a path through the planting.

Choose plants based on site considerations for light, moisture, and soil. Vary plant structure, height, bloom succession, and flower color for seasonal appeal and butterfly habitat. After planting, a shredded-wood mulch layer helps establish natives by retaining moisture and discouraging weeds.

Native Landscaping in a n



Illustration by Doug Adamson,
RDG Planning & Design

Strong Roots

Native plants have a tremendous root architecture that builds soil quality and increases organic matter content. High organic matter helps soil hold water, allowing most rain to infiltrate.

neighborhood setting

Devote at least 30 percent of green space (yards, parks, campuses) to native landscaping, and direct runoff toward native landscaped areas.



Mowed Border

Maintain a mowed grass border around native landscaping in urban settings for a managed appearance.



Native Landscaping



Buying native plants

Plants of the same species can vary considerably, depending on their geographic origin. To find local, native plants for your area, look for a seed or plant source that sells local ecotypes. Be wary of ‘wildflower’ mixes because many of these mixes contain seeds native to the United States, but not necessarily to Iowa.

Places for Iowans to buy native plants

(Courtesy of the Iowa Prairie Network)

Agren, Inc. Carroll	Kingfisher Farms Long Grove
Allendan Seed Company Winterset	Kurtz, Carl & Linda St. Anthony
Blooming Prairie Nursery Carlisle	McGinnis Tree and Seed Company Glenwood
Cedar River Garden Center Palo	Naylor Seed Co., Inc. Scotch Grove
Custom Seed Services Walnut	Osenbaugh Grass Seeds Lucas
Diversity Farms Dedham	Prairie Flower Nursery Fostoria
Driftless Land Stewardship Glen Haven, WI	Prairie Grass Unlimited Burlington
Epley Brothers Hybrid, Inc. Shell Rock	Prairie Moon Nursery Winona, MN
Feders Prairie Seed Company Blue Earth, MN	Reeves Wildflower Nursery Harper
Genesis Nursery Tampico, IL	Rose Hill Nursery Rose Hill
Hadfield Seed Treyvor	Shooting Star Native Seeds Spring Grove, MN
Ion Exchange Harpers Ferry	Swanson Farms Nevada
Iowa Prairie Seed Company Sheffield	TJ Natives McCallsburg
Iowa Restorations Coon Rapids	Willowglen Nursery & Landscaping Decorah

Environmental benefits of native plants

Root architecture

Native plants have an extensive root architecture. Native roots improve the ability of the soil to infiltrate water and withstand erosive conditions.

Organic matter content

Native plants’ root architecture builds organic matter content, which is a key component of a hydrologically functional landscape. High organic matter content helps soil hold water like a sponge and infiltrate most rain.

Managing prairie plantings

During the establishment year, native plantings need routine weeding and watering. Once established, native prairie plantings require less maintenance than non-native gardens. Fertilizer is not recommended for prairie plantings. Fertilizer can stimulate rapid growth and cause plants to flop over. New growth can be stimulated by removing old growth in the spring.

More information about Native Landscaping

Find additional information about native landscaping by visiting the following Web sites:

www.prrcd.org/inl/index.htm
www.iowaprairienetwork.org/
www.rainscapingiowa.org
www.prairienet.org/
www.extension.iastate.edu
www.iowasudas.org