

Designing a Native Landscape Can Help Water Quality

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Natural landscaping is one form of garden design that has been steadily growing in popularity over the past decade. And there are good reasons for it.

Besides lending a heavy dose of scenic beauty with little effort, they act as natural buffers between land and water by soaking up runoff and filtering out pollutants. By replacing traditional lawns, they can reduce use of fertilizers and pesticides that sometimes wash off to streams and lakes.

Planting beds are arranged to create irregular shapes, often curves such as those formed by streams and rivers. Plants are allowed to take their own forms. They are not clipped or trimmed, and, most importantly, the plants used are all native to the region. They are chosen and grouped to express the colors, patterns and textures of the grasslands, woodlands and wetlands within which they evolved.

There are hundreds of plants native to Wisconsin ranging from tiny (0.2 inch) duckweed (*Lemna* sp.) that float and cover the surface of quiet ponds to majestic, white pine (*Pinus strobus*) trees that often reach 200 feet in height and tower above other canopy species.

Some species, such as wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*), can be found throughout the state in many soil types and in both sun and shade. Other species, such as the pale purple coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*), a native of southern Wisconsin prairies, are more limited in their distribution. There are so many species to choose from in any given situation that it is often difficult to know where to begin.

In order to help you get started, here is a set of prairie specifics that are at the top of my list for inclusion in natural, home landscapes. They are all relatively easy to grow and are good performers over a range of soil types. Most require full sun for at least eight hours per day during the growing season.

Prairie plants can add beauty to a landscape and help control erosion.

Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium Scoparium*)

Little bluestem grass is one of our most attractive prairie grasses. It is short, usually 2-3 feet tall, and can either grow in clumps or as a sod. The leaves turn rusty-red in the fall, and the seedheads are feathery and covered with short, white hairs that seem to sparkle when back-lit by the sun.

Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus Heterolepis*)

This fine-textured grass grows in fountain-like clumps that are about one foot in height. The effect resembles the hair of the little troll dolls that were popular several years ago. The flowers form a cylindrical panicle that is produced at the center of the clump of leaves. As you disturb the air around the flower-stalk you will notice a distinct odor that some describe as resembling popcorn.

Wild Bergamot (*Monarda Fistulosa*)

Wild Bergamot has pale lilac to pink-purple flowers that put on quite a show in July and August. It is a good plant to use in clumps to create a mass of blooms. Perhaps the best feature of bergamot is the fragrance of its leaves when crushed and the dried flower heads. The leaves are said to make a strong tea that is soothing to the stomach.

Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias Tuberosa*)

This member of the milkweed family has brilliant orange-red flowers. It comes up late in spring and blooms from July to September. It grows 1-2 feet in height and does well in very light shade as well as full sun. True to its name, butterfly weed attracts lots of butterflies.

Brown-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia Hirta*)

Many of you will be familiar with several horticultural varieties of this genus that are on the market. This native plant has bright yellow flowers with a chocolate center.

Yellow Coneflower (*Rutibida Pinnata*)

The flowers are lemon-yellow with gray centers and borne on tall (2-foot) stalks that dance in the wind.

