

# Prairie City USA<sup>®</sup>

## Welcome Guide

Building stronger communities through integrated prairie habitat, conservation best practices and civic leadership.<sup>™</sup>





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# introduction


## Prairie City USA®: Returning to Our Roots

For thousands of years, prairie was the dominant landscape throughout the heartland of the United States from Mexico to Canada. These prairies—167 million acres (roughly the size of Texas)—were comprised of unique communities of plants and animals, including wildlife big and small: the American Bison, prairie dogs, more than 25 species of waterfowl, and many other birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. The level of diversity found in these prairies was comparable to that found in the Amazon jungle.



In just over 150 years, however, these vast lands have been converted for agriculture production, livestock grazing, and development, losing over 99% of the original prairie. Modern prairie habitat loss is more often due to fragmentation, invasive species, mismanagement, and a lack of understanding. The effects of this dramatic landscape shift continue to be at the epicenter of many of our nation's top conservation problems. Endangered species, erosion, flooding, toxic algae and dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico all can be attributed in part to loss of prairie.

Prairie City USA is a municipal certification and organizing program designed to complement existing community conservation activities that integrate prairie and pollinator best practices. Prairie City USA communities work to enhance and restore commercial, residential, and industrial green spaces into native prairie and pollinator habitat achieving benefits in three core areas:

**1****FINANCIAL SAVINGS****2****• ECOLOGICAL FUNCTION****3****• CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

**Prairie plants have deep, massive roots that efficiently use water. Some roots can be three times longer than the plant above them!**



## Become a Certified Prairie City USA® Community

Nearly every community across America can become a certified Prairie City USA. A commitment to implementing on-the-ground conservation practices and developing a Prairie City management plan for your community are first steps in becoming and maintaining program certification.



**In the U.S., prairies once  
covered over 167 million acres.  
Over 99% has been lost.**





# why

## Why your Town Should Become a Prairie City USA

### 1 FINANCIAL SAVINGS

The financial benefits of becoming a Prairie City USA are many and include:



- ✓ Reduced maintenance and mowing cost for grass landscapes. Save up to \$400/acre/year.



- ✓ Reduced use and exposure to chemicals such as fertilizer, and weed control



- ✓ Reduced watering costs

Converting traditionally mowed spaces into native plantings can significantly reduce many associated municipal maintenance and labor costs. Less mowing reduces fuel and equipment costs. Staff hours and labor savings can be converted to more productive community projects. Once established, native plantings can become self-sustaining and provide an excellent seed source for community expansion and distribution.

**Converting mowed lawn to prairie can save communities up to \$400/acre/year.**



## 2 ECOLOGICAL FUNCTION

Prairie and pollinator habitats provide tremendous environmental benefits by enhancing wildlife habitat and improving ecological function.



### Climate Change

Prairie plantings have capacity to capture large quantities of carbon and are a helpful tool to showcase municipal leadership and local actions for change;



### Improved Water Quality

- Prairie grasses and plants develop deep roots that help clean and store water;
- Reduces algae blooms/nutrient loading;
- Reduces storm water impacts;



### Erosion Control

- Reduces topsoil loss;
- Improves water infiltration;



### Wildlife

- Pollinators are critical for crops, food production and biodiversity. Native prairie plantings provide needed habitat for countless species including birds, small mammals, insects, reptiles, and amphibians;
- Many small sites provide connected wildlife travel lanes;



### Chemicals

- Reduces pesticide and fertilizer use and expense.

**Prairies can capture much more carbon below ground than a forests can above ground.**



### 3 CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Prairie plantings enrich communities and provide opportunities for citizens to teach and learn, engage, appreciate, and explore nature in all seasons. Prairie City USA plantings consist of highly diverse mixes of grasses and flowers that bloom throughout the growing season. Stems and seed heads provide a uniquely interesting landscape even during winter.

Additional benefits include:



#### **Community Engagement**

- Individuals can volunteer to assist with planting new and maintaining sites, strengthening community networks and pride;
- Groups and individuals such as service clubs, garden clubs, birding clubs, Boy Scouts, 4H, FFA, and youth groups can work with Prairie City leaders take on a site restoration themselves, including components such as fundraising, site design, implementation, and long-term maintenance to create a planting for which they can be recognized;
- These plantings are outdoor classrooms for teaching and learning about a range of environmental topics, such as pollinators, food webs, plant identification, and climate change, raising individual and the community's understanding and awareness of the natural world.



#### **Sponsorships**

Prairie City plantings can be sponsored by individuals, local businesses or civic groups



#### **Community Appeal**

- Promote your plantings to attract visitors to discover your unique green spaces;
- Retain residents and attract new residents by creating interesting outdoor public areas while becoming more ecologically and financially sustainable;
- Compliment local sustainability plans;
- Enhance mundane public areas;
- Encourage residents to get outside and explore these landscapes, promoting good health and creating opportunities for neighborhood interactions.



# how

## Steps to Become a Certified Prairie City USA

Prairie City USA is an asset to the community. A diverse and inclusive audience of stakeholders is vital for successful implementation, growth and sustainability. Identifying local partners and talking with community leaders is critical to ensure planting authorizations and meeting Prairie City USA standards for certification.

### STEPS TO PRAIRIE CITY USA

- 1 Meet with community leaders to discuss benefits;
- 2 Form a local Prairie City USA advisory committee;
- 3 Ensure/change city ordinances to allow for prairie plantings;
- 4 Commit to a Prairie City USA implementation/management Level;
- 5 Adopt a city resolution to join Prairie City USA.





# Prairie City USA Levels

Becoming a Prairie City USA will help guide your community to establishing successful prairie and pollinator plantings. Our team of habitat and restoration specialists will help provide a customized management plan based on your community goals and capacity for implementing on-the-ground projects. Management plans are site specific and detail the restoration steps and the critical long-term management techniques. Participation also provides access to signage and numerous resources to help engage the community. Contact Wildlife Forever to select a level that fits your capacity to become a Certified Prairie City USA.



***“Prairie City USA has helped our community create more functioning wildlife habitat, cleaner water, and a more attractive place to live and work, all while saving taxpayer dollars.”*** Mayor Ben Schierer, Fergus Falls, MN

## CHOOSE YOUR STARTING LEVEL

LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Meet with community Leaders to discuss benefits</li> <li>✓ Form a local advisory committee (team)</li> <li>✓ Add or amend city ordinances as needed to allow for prairie</li> <li>✓ Adopt a city resolution to join Prairie City USA®</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Write and adopt a Prairie City USA® Management Plan</li> <li>✓ Receive training or continuing education</li> <li>✓ Maintain all existing restoration sites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Restore at least 10% of city-owned mowed acres to prairie</li> <li>✓ Maintain all existing restoration sites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Restore at least 15% of city-owned mowed acres to prairie</li> <li>✓ Maintain all existing restoration sites</li> <li>✓ Host annual Prairie City USA® community event/fundraiser</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Restore at least 25% of city-owned mowed acres to prairie</li> <li>✓ “Best Yard Award” given annually to private citizen whose property has showcased prairie restoration</li> <li>✓ Maintain all existing restoration sites</li> </ul>

# restoration guide



## ✓ SITE SELECTION

The local advisory team will create a prioritized list of potential sites to be planted. Prairie plants thrive in sunshine, so avoid sites that are shaded much of the day. Sites can be of any size. There are native plants that thrive in all types of site conditions (wet/dry, gravel/sand/clay, full/partial sun, etc.) so do not overlook sites that might otherwise be considered 'challenging' to maintain as mowed lawn. Site selection criteria might also consider economic impact (how much money will be saved), 'habitat corridors' that connect sites together for wildlife benefits, water capture/filtration, and level of visibility to the public.





## ✓ SITE PREPARATION

Thorough site preparation that is tailored for each specific site is critical to the long-term success of your plantings. Depending on what type of vegetation is currently growing on the site, preparation might include herbicides, sod removal, physical barriers, tilling, or mowing. The local advisory team will work with local experts to make site-by-site decisions.

## ✓ PLANT SPECIES SELECTION

Plant selection is about what species will grow at a site and determine the desired 'look' of the site when it is mature. The goal should be to create plantings that look like what grew there historically. As such, prairie plantings should be diverse, with an appropriate ratio of flowers, grasses, shrubs, and trees, and include only species that are native to the area. Prairie City USA requires that all native plant seeds and plants be acquired from stock that has originated within 100 miles of the project whenever possible. In many locales, native plant suppliers and natural resources professionals can help create a list of appropriate native species for your site.

## ✓ PLANTING

How you plant will depend on site conditions, size of the site, if you are planting plugs or seeds, how much time and labor your staff and volunteers can commit to, and what type of equipment is available. If you are using seed, you may be able to plant using a tractor-pulled seeder drill. On smaller sites, you can spread the seed by hand. If you are planting plugs or larger plants, they will have to be planted individually by hand. Plan to install your seeds and plants in the spring or fall if possible to avoid hot, dry weather that will make it difficult for them to thrive. Winter seeding works in some areas.

## ✓ MAINTENANCE

The phrase "the first year they sleep, the second year they creep, and the third year they leap" is a good way to remember that native plantings take time to get established. Most native plants put down roots before growing much above ground so in the first year or two, it might not seem like they are thriving. Maintenance in the first year primarily involves watering if necessary, keeping grazers like geese away, and controlling invasive weeds. By the second year, the site should not need watering; weed control is the primary maintenance task. By the third year, the site should be growing well and filling in, which helps it outcompete invading weeds. On-going maintenance involves monitoring for and controlling aggressive weeds and periodic prescribed burns or high-set mowing to remove native plant duff.





# conservation communities



A Division of Wildlife Forever



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## **Prairie City USA: a Community Status Symbol for the Future of Conservation**

Selecting the appropriate level will ensure a successful community program for many years. Signage including additional promotional items will be made available for communities with an approved management plan. Communities are encouraged to work with their local Chamber of Commerce and business leaders to support and promote their Certified Prairie City USA status.

Understanding that capacity and funding for implementation of the Prairie City USA management plan may vary during the plan duration, this model is adaptable to the degree implementation is feasible. Communities can increase or decrease their level of commitment. However, participating communities are required to maintain a minimum certification Level One status.

**Contact us today to get started!**