

Mini Prairie Plantings

By Mike Glaspell

What is a mini prairie?

My definition of a mini prairie is a simulated prairie planting done on a very small scale, suitable for most suburban yards, consisting of mainly native species of grasses and forbs.

While a mini prairie will bring some of the benefits of a prairie habitat to our own yards, note that I am not calling them prairie restorations. Prairie restorations are very complex and very difficult to achieve, especially on the scale we will be talking about. Mini prairies are more of a simulation, if they require a label. Natural prairies will have hundreds of species of plants, whereas I think we would be more than successful to even achieve twenty or so species.



Why plant a prairie?

There are a myriad of reasons to bring a taste of the wild into our personal space. Besides the aesthetically pleasing aspects of having beautiful flowers, there is a bit of duty and purpose to it.

Mini prairies are resilient. Once established, they are drought tolerant, require no additional fertilizer or irrigation, and are generally easy to maintain. Their plants also have extensive root systems that sequester carbon, create soil, make land more water permeable and less susceptible to flood, and can remove contaminants and excess nutrients from water runoff before it reaches our waterways.

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Philosophically speaking, there seems to be a calming effect and sense of belonging to surround ourselves with a semblance of true nature, as it was intended to be. As I've heard a well-known naturalist Bill Fontenot, "The Nature Dude," reference, there is a sense of time and place associated with native plantings. I think it helps to keep us grounded to experience seasons in our plantings, as well as a sense of place, based on the plants that grow around us. With modern conventional landscaping of "cookie cutter" evergreen mounded shrubs, if I were to show you a picture of a conventionally landscaped home, it would be difficult to distinguish what part of the country it is in, much less the season. Prairies and native plantings have a seasonal progression that reminds us of "when and where" we are in the world.





Mini prairies will bring a little piece of the wild to us. Since I've planted a couple of mini prairies, along with other native plants scattered throughout the landscape, I have been amazed at the multitude of wildlife that now visits our yard. I can experience an adventure and numerous photo opportunities without ever leaving home. Insects (including native pollinators), bird species (some of which I have never encountered), and numerous other invertebrates are now in abundance. Now, instead of just stopping to smell the roses, I stop to observe and experience life, in all forms, all around me.

Getting Started

First and foremost, find a place. Most prairie plants are sun loving and will require at least a half day or more of sun. You also need to take your soil type into consideration. Many prairie type plants generally like well drained soil, perhaps slightly on the drier side. But take comfort, as South Louisiana is notoriously lacking in "drier" soils, these plants are widely adaptable and there are always species and seed mixes for different soil types.

Next, you will have to make a plan and decide on your method of establishment. I will discuss my experiences with getting two separate mini prairie plantings started and the ways I went about it.

Whichever method you choose, you will likely have to contend with turfgrass lawn. The elimination of turfgrass can be achieved with several applications of herbicide (I know this a dirty word for some, but it is used sparingly and is very effective), or a method of smothering the turfgrass until it is dead.

For my first planting, I applied a few applications of herbicide about a month apart toward the end of summer and into fall and broadcast a prairie type seed mix in late winter/early spring. Seed to soil contact is very important for establishment, so I raked out most of the dead turfgrass prior to broadcasting seed. After seeding, I then compacted the area by walking on it to make sure that the seed was in good contact with the soil. Keep the soil moist with irrigation until the seedlings get established. You have less control of the plant layout with this method as a seed mix is generally used. Over time, the plants establish themselves and through reseeding, natural spread and competition, they find their micro niches inside the prairie where they will perform best. In my experience, the seed broadcast method provides a greater diversity of plant species.



For my second planting, I placed a layer of cardboard topped with a thick layer of mulch, obtained for free from a tree trimming service, and allowed it to sit for about a year before planting in it. Some also use solarization, involving the use of plastic sheeting laid over an area to smother and burn the grass underneath, though I have no experience with this method. With this particular planting, I used plugs that I grew from seed in starter packs. I obtained several species of locally sourced prairie plant seeds and started the seeds either in late summer or early spring. Once established in the planting cells, I plugged them into the planting area a little at a time, as they were mature enough to do so. This method has proved to be slightly slower and I will be adding diversity a little at a time,

probably over several years. However, you have far greater control of the placement of a particular species and can create “drifts” of color and texture, which may be a little more natural in appearance.

So far, I am pleased with both methods I’ve used to establish my mini prairie plantings. They each have had their pros and cons, so I will not recommend one over the other. Choose whatever method works for your situation.

Maintenance of Mini Prairies

As far as establishment goes, control of weeds will be the initial concern for your prairie. The plug and mulching method had a far less weed control issue than the broadcast seeding on open ground did. The mulch between my plugs acted as a groundcover to suppress weeds to a large extent. Both of my mini prairies are small enough that I was able to control weeds by hand for the most part. If you are unable to control weeds by hand, mowing at a high setting above the establishing prairie plants can keep the weeds at bay until the prairie plantings take hold. It is important to have plants spaced fairly close together to create a groundcover to discourage weed growth.

In late winter, it will be time to mow or burn your mini prairie to get it ready for the new growth. In this regard, I will again be treating both of my prairie plantings differently.

My oldest planting is in the back of my yard and in a location where it is safe to have a controlled burn. With a water hose on hand, I start a small controlled burn when conditions



are favorable, taking wind speed and direction into account. I only have smaller grass species, so fuel is somewhat limited, which is favorable for me, as it keeps the flames low and controlled. Extreme caution needs to be used with this method and only as local laws will allow.

My newer planting will be mowed/cut back. It is in my front yard and has young, limbed up trees among the prairie plants that I would not want to damage by fire. There is also still wood mulch that is not completely decomposed that would likely be susceptible to fire.

Besides some occasional hand control of the more aggressive species that may want to take over the prairie, this is about all the maintenance that will be required.

A few miscellaneous things to consider with mini prairies

Local ordinances, HOA’s and neighbor complaints may be a few obstacles you will face. I don’t have any of these issues, but did some research just in case. Most agree that you have to make your mini prairie appear intentional. This may mean a well defined border, surrounded by lawn, and contained to a “bed” if you will. Also, signage such as “Wildflower Meadow”, “Pollinator Garden”, “Native Plant Habitat” etc., can further indicate that the planting is intentional and not an issue of neglect. You can also speak to neighbors to explain what you’re doing beforehand and make them feel a part of the process. Who knows, maybe they’ll even join you or at least become an ally.

The mini prairie will not always appear tidy and neat. Some of these plants will get rangy and most will die back in the winter. I personally don’t mind this as the winter plant structure and seed heads are also appealing to me, especially the grasses.

I intentionally did not get into individual plant species as that is a personal preference. Most will go with some type of seed mix, which should be sourced as locally as possible, as they are most likely best adapted to your growing conditions. Ratios of grasses to wildflowers should also be considered. Natural prairies usually have a high ratio of grass species compared to forbs. You may want to flip this ratio for a mini prairie as the grasses can dominate a small space.

Patience is needed. Many prairie plants will not flower the first year as they are perennials that use the first year for establishment. Most seed mixes compensate for this with a percentage of annuals that will flower the first year.

Your prairie will change in appearance not only with the seasons, but from year to year as well. As plants get established, some will naturally be more aggressive, spreading via root rhizomes and/or prolific reseeding. Some will not do well in the conditions they are in and wither away and disappear in a few years. As mentioned previously, there may be a need for some control of the more aggressive species to prevent your prairie from becoming a monoculture. When dealing with ecosystems in a miniature version, you will not always be able to just let nature take its course. Some intervention may occasionally be required. On a positive note, this type of maintenance is very limited and fairly easy to stay on top of. It is also wonderful to find that “surprise” plant or flower that you never saw before all of sudden erupt and put on a display without warning.

In conclusion



I tried to give an honest account of the few challenges of establishing a mini prairie, but I hope the overall takeaway is that this will be something you can and want to accomplish. I love all my native trees, shrubs and plants, but I have to say that the mini prairie is the most rewarding of all. The diversity of life in both flora and fauna and their interaction is captivating beyond words. Give it a shot and best of luck!

Mike Glaspell is a member of the Native Plant Initiative of Greater New Orleans and the Louisiana Native Plant Society. He and his wife Jessica are hobbyist landscapers focusing on native plants at their home in Lockport, La. They also enjoy photographing the native flora and fauna of the area.