

NATIVE NEWS

SUCCESSFUL TURF CONVERSION TO NATIVE PRAIRIE

Many of our large corporate campuses feature vast expanses of unutilized lawns. These spaces could be easily planted to a native prairie meadow providing the benefits of increased storm water infiltration, decreased maintenance, and habitat for birds and pollinators. The conversion process will consist of site preparation, seed installation, and developmental maintenance.

Site preparation will involve the elimination of the existing turf grass. This is most easily done through a couple of applications of a glyphosate herbicide. The applications should be spaced about 2 weeks apart so the results of the first application are visible when the second is made. For those not wishing to use herbicide, a more laborious option is the use of a sod cutter to cut and remove the sod. Tilling the sod is not recommended since the rhizomatous turf grasses are difficult to kill via tilling. Also be certain that no pre-emergent herbicides which are typically used for crabgrass control have been applied within the last 9 months as they will jeopardize germination of the native seed.

Once the sod has been killed or removed, seed installation can occur. Seeding may either occur as a dormant installation after November 1st or in the spring until mid June. Choose a seed mix adapted to your site that fits your aesthetic and habitat goals. Seed is most efficiently installed through the use of a no-till prairie seed drill. It cuts open the deadened sod and drops the seed into a shallow slit. The drill also has different boxes to handle the different sized seeds. If the sod has been removed, the seed may also be broadcast sown on the surface and firmed in with a lawn roller or cultipacker. Remember, most prairie seeds will not germinate if covered with more than ¼ inch of soil, so do not incorporate the seed into the soil. If sowing on bare soil, always include a cover crop of oats and annual ryegrass for temporary erosion control. If drilling into newly killed sod, this cover crop is not necessary but is still advisable to provide a more rapid green up for potentially skeptical clients.

Developmental maintenance is key to long term success of the installation. Once the cover crop (or volunteer weeds) reach ten inches in height during the first growing season, mow them back down to 4 to 6 inches in height. Do this as often as needed to keep the overall height under 10 inches. At the end of the first growing season, mow the entire installation down to 2 inches after the first hard frost. If annual ryegrass is included, it tends to act as a biennial in this area, bolting to set seed in the second spring. It should be mown when the seed heads form, which is typically in May of the second season.

After the second growing season, annual maintenance will include monitoring for and controlling invasive species and rotational mowing or burning where feasible during the dormant season.

PLANT FEATURE: NORTHERN SEA OATS (*CHASMANTHIUM LATIFOLIUM*)



A very distinctive and ornamental grass, Northern Sea Oats adapts to a wide range of conditions. This attractive species is native to floodplains, becoming common in the southern Midwest. The ornamental seeds appear in mid summer. They remain green until September when they slowly turn brown. They persist until winter weather results in their gradual disintegration.

Northern Sea Oats will adapt to sun or filtered shade. It is very drought tolerant but will also tolerate temporary shallow inundation. It may be used in rain gardens or as a mass planting. Be aware that it will vigorously self-sow in the landscape when happy. The seeds are very attractive in dried arrangements. In a restoration, it is most appropriate south of 40 degrees latitude in well-drained wooded floodplain terraces. Appropriate associates include Beak Grass (*Diarrhena americana*), Riverbank Wild Rye (*Elymus riparius*), Hairy

Wood Mint (*Blephilia hirsuta*), Smooth Beardtongue (*Penstemon calycosus*), and False Sunflower (*Heliopsis helianthoides*).