

What is a Prairie and Why Do I Want One?

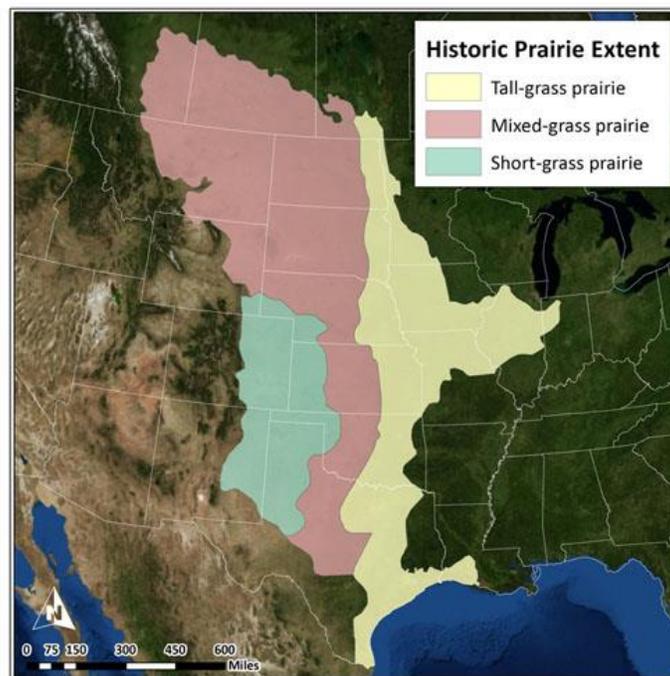
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What is a tallgrass prairie?¹

A Little History

- Prairies used to cover 170 million acres of Northern America and appeared around 10,000 years ago, supporting much of the wildlife native to the U.S.
- There are different types of prairies, including tall-grass prairies, mixed-grass prairies, and short-grass prairies. Illinois is home to the tall-grass prairie.
- Tall-grass prairies have outstanding soil quality that is perfect for crop production. European settlers discovered this and quickly destroyed almost all of the tall-grass prairies in Northern America.
- Today, only 1% of the original tall-grass prairies remain.
 - Check out the map below and imagine only 1% of the yellow area.

Historical Extent of Prairies²



The Ecosystem of Tall-Grass Prairies

- Roughly 80% of the foliage is made up of grasses, and includes over 100 different species.
- The remaining 20% includes over 500 species of flowers and forbs.

- Restoration – A native ecosystem that has been recreated on a degraded landscape, and is managed to emulate pre-settlement biotic conditions. Restorations involve planting seeds from native plants that may have grown on the site in the past. Restorations usually involve removing invasive plant species.

What is a “prescribed burn/fire”?

The “What?”⁵

- A prescribed burn is the process of planning and applying a controlled wildfire to achieve a desired outcome.
- Term is interchangeable with “controlled burn/fire”.

The “Why?”⁴

- Fire is a natural part of life for native woodlands, wetlands, and prairies.
- Modern tendencies to control and prevent prairie fires encourage the growth of invasive plants that can out-compete native grasses and forbs.
- Reduction in native plants leads to a reduction in plant and animal diversity, causing some species to become extinct in the area.
- Burns will also reduce the fuel loads on the land.

The “When?”⁴

- Spring and fall are the ideal times to perform prescribed burns.
- Atmospheric conditions and time constrain the dates when burns are safe and practical. Below are just a few things that are considered:
 - Temperature: 28-70 degrees Fahrenheit
 - Humidity: 30-65%
 - Chance of precipitation: <20%
 - Wind speed: 5-20 mph
 - Wind direction: specific to site

The “How/Who?”⁴

- Burns are performed and supervised by professionals. Contact NLI for more information on performing a prescribed burn on your easement.



What is an invasive versus a native species?⁶

Defining the Differences

- Native Plant – A plant that is a part of the balance of nature that has developed over hundreds or thousands of years in a particular region or ecosystem.
 - Note: The word “native” should always be used with a geographic qualifier (e.g., native to Northern Illinois).
 - Only plants found in this country before European settlement are considered to be native to the United States.
- Non-Native Plant – A plant introduced with human help (intentionally or accidentally) to a new place or new type of habitat where it was not previously found.
 - Note: Not all non-native plants are invasive. Some even struggle to survive when introduced to an area outside of their home range.
- Invasive Plant – A plant that is both non-native and able to establish on many sites, grow quickly, and spread to the point of disrupting plant communities or ecosystems.

“Is this plant native or invasive?”

- Here is a good resource to determine this⁷:
<http://bonap.net/NAPA/Genus/Traditional/County>
This database provides a range map for every species known to occur in the lower 48. Entries are alphabetized by genus.
- There are also Facebook groups such as “Illinois Native Plant Society” and “Illinois Botany” where individuals will identify a plant if you post a picture of it.

Resources

1. <https://www.nps.gov/tapr/learn/nature/a-complex-prairie-ecosystem.htm>
2. <http://gulfcoast.harc.edu/Biodiversity/PrairieHabitat/tabid/2282/Default.aspx>
3. <http://www.moprairie.org/faq/what-is-a-prairie-remnant-a-restoration-and-a-reconstruction/>
4. <https://www.tallgrassrestoration.com/ourservices/prescribedburns>
5. <https://www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/management/fire/prescribed-burning>
6. http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ct/technical/ecoscience/invasive/?cid=nrcs142p2_011124
7. http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ct/technical/ecoscience/invasive/?cid=nrcs142p2_011124
8. <http://www.slideshare.net/SarinaLotlikar/raingarden-education>
9. Prescribed burn image:
<http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/ohio/howwework/prescribed-burning.xml>
10. Native prairie remnant image: <http://www.prairieworksinc.com/category/law/>