



Naturescaping

Southern Ontario's native plants existed here for thousands of years before European settlement. This group of plants evolved together with native wildlife and insects to the local climate and soil conditions. Naturescaping involves using native plant communities as a model for your landscape design. This results in wildlife-friendly, low-maintenance gardens that reflect the natural heritage of an area.

Native plant communities include: wildflowers, ferns, grasses, shrubs and trees. This fact sheet introduces native wildflowers and grasses suitable for gardening in southern Ontario. Please see the *Landscaping for Energy Conservation* fact sheet in this series for information on trees and shrubs.

First step

To save time and money, plan before you dig. Make a sketch of your property. Make note of soil, sunlight and moisture conditions of the areas to be planted. This will help you select suitable plants. For sunny, dry areas, meadow and prairie plants work well. Woodland plants, like ferns, thrive under the shade of trees. Plan this transition over several seasons, allow some experimentation and evaluation of results. Remember to take photos to document progress and share with others.

Neighbourhood relations

Radical changes to landscaping may upset some neighbours. Be proactive by explaining what you are doing and why. It is also wise to check with your municipality about plant-related bylaws.



Get gardening!

Prepare new garden beds by removing grass. The easiest way to do this is to cover the grass using several layers of wet newspaper or biodegradable landscaping fabric and cover with 12–15 centimetres of topsoil. Or cover the area with black plastic for several weeks to kill grass before planting. The use of herbicides is NOT recommended because it may harm beneficial insects and microorganisms. It may also be against the law.

Maintaining your garden

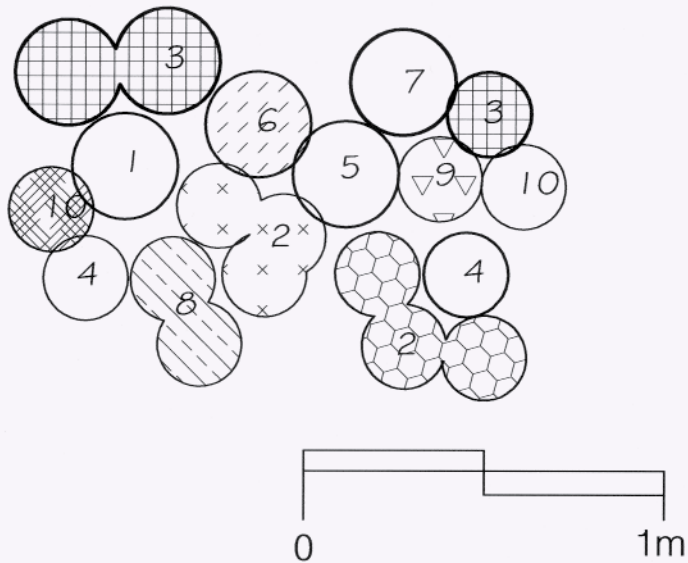
Newly planted wildflowers and grasses need about 5 - 7 centimetres of water a week for the first month. After one month, water deeply once a week if there is no rain. Gradually reduce watering frequency over the first growing season until it is no longer required. Remove unwanted migrant plants by hand, being careful not to disturb roots of native plants. Avoid using pesticides on or around your naturalized plantings, even if you see damage from caterpillars, aphids or other insects. Native plants tolerate insect activity better than most ornamentals, and chemicals may harm beneficial insects that keep pest populations in check.

Prairie and meadow gardens

Tallgrass prairies and meadows are colourful communities that require full sun conditions. While prairie plants prefer dry conditions, some meadow species, such as Joe-pye Weed, do best in moist soil. Meadow and prairie plants prefer nutrient-poor soils, so fertilizer is not needed. Add sand to heavier soils before planting to improve drainage.

Prairie and meadow gardens provide food and habitat for a diversity of birds and insects including many butterflies.

Sample prairie garden



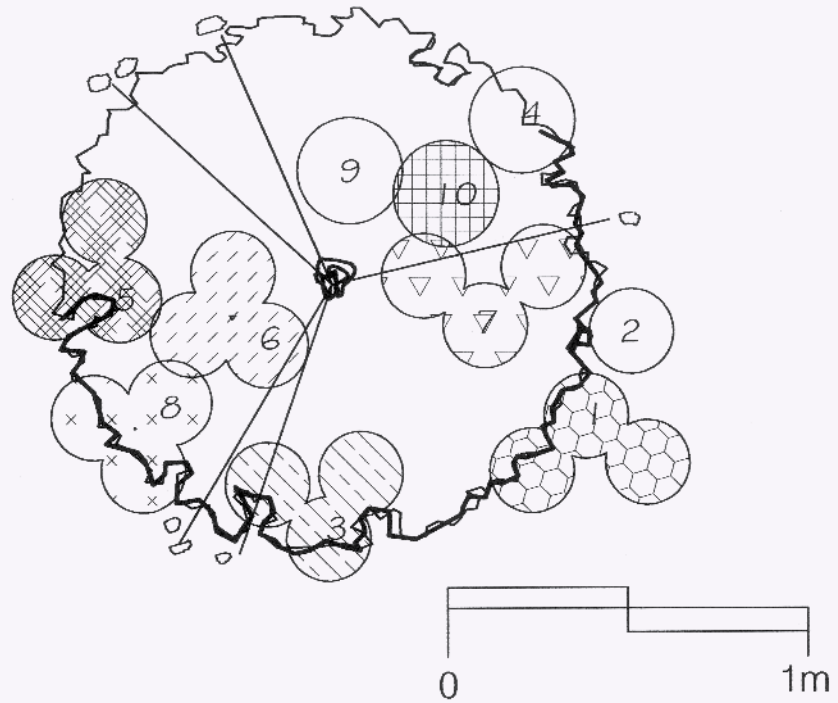
PLANT SPECIES	HEIGHT	DESCRIPTION
1 Pale Purple Coneflower	60-150 cm (2-5')	showy purple flower; seed head is a food source for birds
2 Pearly Everlasting	30-90 cm (1-3')	grey foliage; white flowers; larval host for butterflies
3 Big Bluestem	90-240 cm (3-8')	elegant prairie grass with bluish seed heads
4 Indian Grass	90-240 cm (3-8')	flowing grass with delicate bronze seed head.
5 Wild Bergamot	60-120 cm (2-4')	easy to grow; purple flower; nectar source
6 Butterfly Weed	60-90 cm (2-3')	orange flowers; nectar source; larval host for monarchs
7 Spotted Joe-pye Weed	90-270 cm (3-9')	pink clusters of flowers; nectar source for butterflies
8 Prairie Smoke	15-45 cm (6-18")	spring flowering plant with unique 'smoky' seed head
9 New England Aster	90-180 cm (3-6')	purple flowers in fall; nectar source for monarchs
10 Black-eyed Susan	30-90 cm (1-3')	yellow flowers; very hardy; nectar source for butterflies

Prairie and meadow systems depend on natural disturbances, such as fire, to rejuvenate native plants and control woody plants. Performing a controlled burn is sometimes possible, with the right permits and expert supervision, but this is not the only option. Mowing annually in the spring or fall will also work. If feasible, burn the mowed material offsite and return ashes to the garden. This will mimic the natural nutrient cycling of a fire. Contact local authorities before attempting any kind of outdoor burn.

Woodland garden

Woodland plants thrive in low-light conditions and are a perfect choice for shady yards. These plants are good ground-covers and their early blooms provide a welcome sign of spring. Natural woodlands have rich soil. Copy this by adding plenty of compost or well rotted manure to the soil before planting. Once established, these gardens require minimal maintenance. Let leaves remain where they fall to cycle nutrients naturally. Fallen logs or standing snags (dead trees) provide habitat for birds, insects and other wildlife. If leaving a snag in your yard, ensure that it is not located where it may fall and cause harm. Native shrubs in the understory also provide shelter and food for wildlife.

Sample woodland garden



PLANT SPECIES	HEIGHT	DESCRIPTION
1 Foam Flower	15-30 cm (6-12")	spikes of white flowers in spring; good groundcover
2 Wild Columbine	30-90 cm (1-3')	showy red flowers; nectar source; self seeds and spreads
3 Maidenhair Fern	30-60 cm (1-2')	delicate leaves; likes moist soil and medium to deep shade
4 Woodland Sunflower	60-180 cm (2-6')	yellow sunflower will thrive in semi-shade
5 Wild Geranium	30-60 cm (1-2')	blue flowers in spring; dry to moist soil; semi-shade
6 Woodland Strawberry	15 cm (6")	good groundcover; small white flowers and berries
7 Wild Ginger	15-20 cm (6-8")	good groundcover; two large basal leaves; small berries
8 Bloodroot	15-20 cm (6-8")	showy white flowers in spring; lobed leaves
9 Solomon's Seal	30-90 cm (1-3')	glossy green leaves; small greenish flowers
10 Large-leaved Aster	30-120 cm (1-4')	blue flowers in late summer/fall; drought tolerant

Most woodland species prefer a moist environment. Redirecting eavestroughs into the garden or installing a rainbarrel will save on watering costs and reduce stormwater runoff. When redirecting downspouts, to avoid any leakage direct away from basements. Mulching the garden with wood chips, leaves or compost will also keep soil moist, suppress weeds and enrich the soil. Check with your municipal works department to see if they offer free mulch.

Garden invaders

Non-native introduced species are considered invasive if they aggressively out-compete native species. Seeds from these invasive plants can be transferred to gardens by wind, wildlife or human activities. Save time by removing these invaders as soon as they appear. Make sure you remove the entire plant with all the roots before it sets seed. You may need to do this for several years before the seed bank in the soil is gone. Watch out for these two common invaders in the Greater Toronto Area:



▲ **Garlic Mustard** has serrated leaves, small white flowers and a slight garlic smell.



▲ **Dog-strangling Vine** has shiny dark green leaves, long seed pods and small brownish flowers.

Many common groundcovers, such as Periwinkle, Lily of the Valley and Goutweed, spread rapidly throughout gardens and into natural areas. Limit their spread by bordering gardens and pulling out ‘escapes.’ Avoid “meadow in a can” seed mixes—they often have self-seeding non-natives, such as Queen Anne’s Lace and Dame’s Rocket, that quickly take over. For more information on invasive plants, see the Canadian Botanical Conservation Network website at (www.rbg.ca/cbcn/en/projects/invasives).

Sources of native plants

Some conventional nurseries sell a few native species along with the more typical ornamentals. For greater selection and expertise, choose a native plant nursery. Make sure the seed stock is local and harvest methods are ethical. Below is a list of native plant sources in and around Toronto:

- Humber Nurseries, Brampton, www.gardencentre.com, 905-794-0555
- North American Native Plant Society — hosts native plant sale every spring, www.nanps.org
- Native Plants in Claremont, Pickering, www.nativeplants.ca, 905-649-8176
- Ontario Seed Company, www.oscseeds.com, 519-886-0557
- The Wildflower Farm, Coldwater, www.wildflowerfarm.com, 1-866-GRO-WILD (website also has a plant database)

Additional resources

- Canadian Wildlife Federation, *Wild about Gardening*, www.wildaboutgardening.org
- Evergreen’s Native Plant database, www.evergreen.ca
- Johnson, Lorraine. *The New Ontario Naturalized Garden*. Random House of Canada, 2001.
- Society for Ecological Restoration, Ontario Chapter, www.serontario.org
- Region of Peel’s Water Smart Program, www.watersmartpeel.ca

For more information, please contact Toronto and Region Conservation
5 Shoreham Drive, Downsview, Ontario M3N 1S4 Tel: 416-661-6600 Fax 416-661-6898 www.trca.on.ca/yards

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