

GROWING NATIVE PLANTS

AN EASY TO FOLLOW HOW-TO GUIDE

WHY NATIVE PLANTS

Before modern settlement, Wisconsin's landscape was a rich mix of native grasses, wildflowers, and trees that supported diverse wildlife and healthy ecosystems. Habitat loss and fragmentation have since reduced biodiversity and weakened these natural systems. By reintroducing native plants into our parks, yards, and communities, we can help restore these vital connections. Native plants are well adapted to local conditions, require minimal care, and help manage stormwater while reducing erosion. They also support birds, pollinators, and other wildlife—creating beautiful, resilient landscapes that benefit both people and the environment.

Impact on Water Quality

In natural areas covered with native plants, rainwater gradually soaks into the ground. Today, much of the land is covered by impervious surfaces—such as roads, parking lots, roofs, and compacted lawns—where water cannot infiltrate. Instead, it runs off the land, carrying sediment, pollutants, and nutrients like phosphorus into nearby lakes and rivers. Excess phosphorus fuels algal blooms that degrade water quality, produce unpleasant odors, and can release toxins harmful to people, pets, and wildlife. The deep roots of native plants help loosen soil, absorb rainwater, and filter out pollutants, reducing runoff and protecting our waterways.



Image: Rainscaping Iowa

Impact on Pollinators

The loss of native plant communities severely undermines pollinator populations, which evolved in close association with local flora. Without these native plants, pollinators increasingly struggle to find the nectar, pollen, shelter and nesting sites they need. At the same time, pollinator declines jeopardize the reproduction of most flowering plants and threaten the agricultural and ecological services they provide.

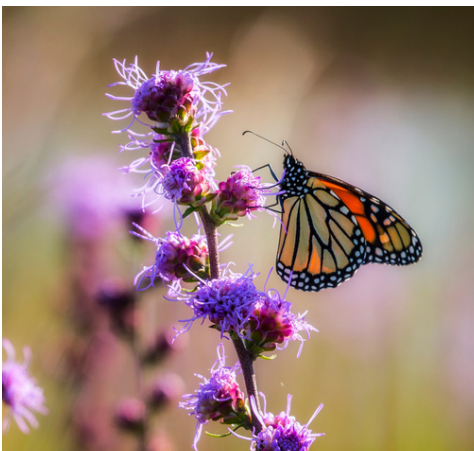


Image: Xercès

GROWING NATIVE PLANTS

Learning to grow your own plants can help reduce the cost of adding native plants to your yard and is a fun way to learn more about the plants.

Supplies

- Seeds
- Pots and trays
- Plant labels
- Garden marker
- Milk jugs
- Box cutter
- Screwdriver, awl, or something sharp
- Soilless potting mix
- Bucket
- Trowel
- Duct tape
- Pencil
- Spray bottle or mister

Why Potting Mix?

It is possible to sprout seedlings using soil right from your garden but for this program we ask volunteers to use a soilless potting mix for several reasons:

- When using soil from your garden, you don't know what else might be in the soil, such as disease spores, bacteria, weed seeds, jumping worms, or other unwanted materials.
- Soilless mix has better drainage and provides a less compact material which helps with the seedling's root development.
- Soilless mix is not as heavy as soil making the trays easier to transport and move around.

Examples of Potting MIX



Many of the local home and garden stores sell a soilless potting mix. Call ahead to make sure they have it in stock to save yourself a trip. Some of these mixes are compressed and give you a large amount of material.

Winter Sowing

Many native plant seeds have built-in dormancy to prevent germination before frosts or drought. To grow them successfully, we need to mimic natural conditions. Most prairie seeds require a cold, moist period—called stratification—before they will sprout. We'll do this using winter sowing: plant seeds in mini greenhouses (like recycled milk jugs) in late fall or early winter, leave them outside over winter, and they'll germinate in spring. Follow the **"Winter Sowing Steps"** on the next page to get started.



WINTER SOWING STEPS

Check each species' **germination code**, and the minimum number of days of cold it needs, prior to planting. Make sure to winter sow your seeds so they have enough cold time outside. It is ok for them to get MORE cold than the minimum amount.



1 Prepare the Container

Punch 10-15 drainage holes in the bottom of a milk jug. Cut the jug starting at the base of the handle, leaving a couple inches of plastic so it can flip open.



2 Pre-Moisten Potting Mix

Mix soilless potting mix with water until it clumps slightly. Prewetting the potting mix helps it absorb moisture much more easily.



3 Fill the Jug

Add pre-moistened potting mix to the jug, leaving about an inch from the top. Pat it (gently) flat for seed placement.



4 Add Seeds

Spread one species of seed over the potting mix and cover with a light layer of dry potting mix. Large seeds can be covered with up to ¼ inch. Small seeds should have a thinner layer. Very tiny seeds (germination code D) should not be covered at all.



5 Moisten and Label

Spray the seed bed gently to thoroughly moisten without disturbing seeds. Label the inside and outside of the jug with the species name.



6 Seal and Winter Outdoors

Tape the jug shut (leaving gaps for air and moisture) and place outside for the winter. Add snow or water if the soil becomes too dry.

TRANSPLANTING STEPS

Moisten the potting mix the same way you did during winter sowing. Dry potting mix is hydrophobic so premoistening it will make it much easier to water the seedlings.

1



Fill Pots

Fill the pots with the potting mix and gently press down with your fingers or another pot to remove air pockets; then add more potting mix to level out the pot.

Use a pencil to make a hole in the middle of each pot so that there is space for the plant roots.

2



Extract Seedlings

Use a trowel or spoon to loosen the soilless potting mix around seedlings in the milk jug. Gently dig out a plant and separate its roots from the surrounding plants. If they are very tangled, soaking the roots briefly in water can help loosen them.

3



Pot up the Seedlings

Insert the plant into the hole in the pot and gently move and press the soil around the roots so they are covered. Try to plant at the same depth as it was growing in the jug. The part of the stem that was exposed in the milk jug should stay above the surface of the soil. Make a plant label (or reuse the one from your milk jug).

4



Water Gently

A good way to do this is to poke a hole in the top of a water bottle so you have a very light stream of water. Water around the edges of the seedling so you don't accidentally wash the soilless potting mix off the roots.

Place the tray with the seedlings outside in a sunny or part shade location, depending on species needs.

Make sure to water the plants until they are large enough to plant, which is usually when the roots start coming out the bottom of the pot.

SPRING SPROUTING

In early to mid-March, move the jugs to a sunnier location (if they are in the shade) and give them some water if they are not moist. If the spring is dry and they aren't getting rainwater, you should keep doing this as the weather warms so the soil is consistently moist. Once plants start to emerge (usually early April) you can pull the tape off the jug and flip open the top on warm days (above 50 degrees). Keep the top on the jug until the threat of freezing temperatures and frost are gone (mid-May); that way you can flip the jug closed again if there is a frost/freeze danger. After that you can cut off the top off the milk carton.

TRANSPLANTING

Once the plants have at least two sets of true leaves, you can begin to transplant them into the pots. Don't wait too long to transplant. If the jugs have a lot of seedlings, the seedlings might not grow very large before they are ready for transplant. Keep them out of really intense, direct sunlight for a week or so after transplanting to reduce the shock. Follow the **"Transplanting Steps"** on the previous page to get started.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This guide does not go into garden design, planting, or garden maintenance. To dive into these topics, visit our website:

<https://lwr.danecounty.gov/Native-Gardening>

To stay in the loop about native plant workshops and learning opportunities in Dane County, sign up for the department's native plant newsletter (sent 4-6 times per year):

<https://lwr.danecounty.gov/news>

