Native prairies can be an ecological and cost effective alternative to higher maintenance turf and more traditional landscapes. However, people often think of prairie landscapes as requiring a vast expanse of land in order to “look right.” The fact of the matter is that our native prairie flowers and grasses can be used to create small scale gardens and “mini-meadows” that rival the finest English gardens. Some primary principles of gardening in small, urban and suburban spaces include:

1) **Select the appropriate plants to match the space and growing conditions.** Low-growing plants are best for garden beds in small yards. Big, bold plants can excel when used in border gardens along fences and structures. Pick plants that are adapted to growing in your soil and sun conditions.

2) **Avoid species that may spread aggressively by seeds or creeping rhizomes.** Plants that may be good candidates for a larger prairie meadow may turn out to be thugs in a garden setting. Those that spread by rhizomes or self-sow readily should be avoided in a garden.

3) **Apply garden design principles for a traditional perennial garden.** Use a variety of long-lived perennials to create color throughout the season, along with complementary foliage types, color combinations, heights (where appropriate), etc.

4) **Include low-growing prairie grasses to provide support for flowers and winter interest.** Grasses compete with the flowers for soil nitrogen and help reduce flopping, while also supporting their stems. The fall colors of bronze, gold and red provide garden interest long after the flowers have finished blooming in fall.

5) **Maintain a mowed lawn border between your neighbor’s property and your prairie.** Some people are still not aware of the many benefits of natural landscapes and think they look “messy.” Don’t plant your prairie meadow right next to their property line if your neighbor is likely to object to having a “wild garden” on his doorstep.

6) **Create prairie beds surrounded by mowed lawn to create context.** The garden will look great offset by mowed lawn, and your neighbors will find it attractive because it is in conformance with the traditional look of a garden. Surround larger prairie meadows with a border of lawn, and include trails through the meadow to allow easy access. The turf will also serve as a firebreak if you are managing your prairie with controlled burning.

7) **Plant members of the Milkweed family with flowers that provide nectar for butterflies.** Leaves of the Milkweeds sustain Monarch caterpillars, and nectar-rich flowers support numerous adult butterflies. You can attract an amazing number of butterflies and other beneficial pollinators to your garden or prairie meadow, including parasitic wasps that help control many garden pests.

8) **Throw away ALL your insecticides!** Prairie gardens and meadows are unsurpassed at providing habitat for insects and other invertebrates, upon which the food web depends. The primary food source of most songbirds and gamebirds is insects. Spraying broad
spectrum insecticides kill far more beneficial insects than harmful ones. Neonicitinoid insecticides in particular have been implicated in the loss of Monarchs and other butterflies, as well as numerous other beneficial garden insects.

9) **Plant native trees and shrubs in adjacent areas to create complementary habitat.** Many butterfly caterpillars rely on the leaves of native woody plants for food. The adults will then utilize your prairie flowers for nectar. Planting native trees and shrubs near your prairie will also create excellent habitat for a wide variety of birds.

10) **Design firebreaks into the landscape if you will be burning your prairie.** Roads, driveways, ponds, streams and lawn make good firebreaks. It is far easier to have ready-made firebreaks that to mow and rake flammable material in spring prior to burning your prairie.

11) **Keep the prairie away from buildings if you will be burning it!** Vinyl siding is particularly susceptible to damage by fire, or just a hot breeze that emanate from the fire. Always have a hose or backpack water tank at the ready when burning near buildings or adjacent fields and woods.

12) **Check with your local government regarding weed and landscaping ordinances.** Many communities have ordinances designed to enforce proper maintenance of lawns and landscapes. These laws are intended to prevent weed proliferation from unmaintained properties onto neighboring homes and businesses, as well as to “keep up” the neighborhood. Many communities have updated their ordinances to allow for properly designed and maintained native gardens and meadows. Be sure to check with your local community on your local laws and landscaping regulations before embarking on your plantings. Some municipalities still prosecute those who dare to challenge the “Law of the Lawn” by planting healthy, diverse, ecological landscapes.

13) **Install educational signage in highly visible new prairie seedings.** A newly seeded prairie often appears to be weedy and unkempt in the first two growing season. The placement of a sign with a message such as “Future Prairie Meadow - Under Construction” or “Prairie Flowers and Butterflies Coming in 2017!” will help allay fears that your newly seeded meadow is going to be permanent eyesore and community embarrassment. Discuss your prairie project with your neighbors before you seed it, so they know what to expect.

14) **Eliminate all perennial weeds prior to planting or seeding the prairie.** This helps reduce unsightly weed growth, encourages better growth of the prairie flowers and grasses, and reduce the amount of time required for maintenance. The judicious use of pre-emergent herbicides and mulch in prairie gardens installed using transplants can keep weeds to a minimum in the first growing season. By the second year, the prairie plants should be firmly in control.

15) **Keep weeds mowed to six inches in the first year of seeded prairies.** Never let weeds get taller than 12 inches in the first growing season. Keep weeds mowed back to 6 inches in the first year, and 12 inches in the second growing season in seeded prairies. This allows light to reach the slower-growing native perennials below the faster growing annual and biennial weeds, and prevents weeds from producing seeds that could re-infest the area.

16) **Maintain your prairie garden or meadow by burning or mowing in mid-spring.** This will help control cool season weeds and grasses such as quackgrass, bluegrass, clover, Creeping Charlie, and many other non-native competitors. Burning is best, but if this is not an option, mow the prairie as close to ground as possible and remove the mowed material to allow the soil to warm up rapidly to favor the warm season prairie plants. Burn or mow when the buds of the Sugar Maple tree (*Acer saccharum*) are just opening.