

# Prairie plains Link



Winter still has a grip on the land, but prairie seeds are stirring.

## Why we plant native, local ecotype, high diversity prairies and wetlands

This newsletter often includes images of Prairie Plains staff or volunteers collecting, raking up, hauling, shelling, sorting, mixing or planting prairie and/or wetland seeds. Here's a closer look at why high diversity prairie and wetland restoration is a vital part of our mission.

First, the concept of planting prairie in general: It is our native ecosystem; it is what was here prior to settlement - the "sea of grass" that was the historic North American Prairie. It is the vegetation that has adapted to the climate and soils of this region. So it only makes sense that when there's a plot of ground to plant - for low-maintenance open space landscaping, wildlife habitat, soil and water conservation, etc., native prairie is the way to go. Elaborating on a few of the major benefits:

- **Preservation of biodiversity.** Protecting the gene pool. This is an urgent global issue, and volumes have been devoted to the subject. From Aldo Leopold in his *Sand County Almanac*: "The first rule of intelligent tinkering is to save all the pieces." It's both a matter of preserving all species - one reason we plant high diversity mixes; it's equally important to protect genetic variation within species - hence our emphasis of local ecotypes. To learn more, go to [www.eowilson.org](http://www.eowilson.org).

- **Wildlife habitat.** Plant the prairie/wetland, and prairie/wetland wildlife will come. We have restored wetland sites for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited and others whose primary mission is preserving and creating habitat for wildlife. ⇨

**An ocean of snow; the prairie-covered road cut just outside the Griffith Prairie west fence; close-up of switchgrass inflorescence.** All wintry photos on this page by Mike Bullerman.



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■ **Soil conservation.** The reason that grasslands around the world are also the world's "breadbaskets" is that grasslands are the champions of building and anchoring soil. Another favorite Leopold quote, from *Round River*: "...the black prairie soil was built by the prairie plants, a hundred distinctive species of grasses, herbs, and shrubs; by the prairie fungi, insects and bacteria; by the prairie mammals and birds, all interlocked in one humming community of cooperation and competition, one biota. This biota, through ten thousand years of living and dying, burning and growing, preying and fleeing, freezing and thawing, built the dark and bloody ground we call prairie."

■ **Water quantity and quality, and flood control.** Prairies and wetlands catch runoff and filter it slowly, removing contaminants before it reaches groundwater and rivers. This critical function is why we are prioritizing stream corridors in our "Ribbons of Prairie" plan for future restorations. More on this in the next *Link!*

■ **Education & research.** Ideally, every school and university should have ready access to a native prairie to experience and study - such as our Griffith Prairie and Olson Nature Preserve. When the genuine article is not at hand, a careful re-creation is in order. It offers the bonus of students being involved in the entire restoration process, from collecting seed to planting to management to collecting seed from their restoration and planting more. We have planted "school prairies" in Aurora, Lincoln and Omaha.

■ **People pasture.** This is a term originally coined by the late Jim Wilson from Polk. Native and restored prairies are places for people to recreate . . . to hike (note the upcoming Volkswalk at Griffith Prairie), take photos, watch birds and other wildlife, botanize, experience solitude and yes, even forage. Kelly Kindscher from the Kansas Biological Survey - and author of *Edible Wild Plants of the Prairie* - emphasized this latter point in his keynote address, "Developing a culture of harvest and use of the planted wild" at our annual meeting last year.

The historic prairie can never be fully restored with its infinitely complex web of organisms, but by using local ecotype seed and high-diversity (a minimum of 75 species) seed mixes, we're accomplishing the next best thing. It remains a top priority in our mission now and into the future. For further details, see *A Guide to Prairie and Wetland Restoration in Eastern Nebraska* by Gerry Steinauer et. al. at prairieplains.org - under publications, then other downloadable files. Or - we'll send you a manual for just \$3 for postage.

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**MISSION:**  
Maintaining and restoring Nebraska ecosystems -  
Creating opportunities for education, research, stewardship and community development.

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**Approaching Event:  
Saturday, April 17  
Mid-Nebraska Trail Seekers  
Volkswalk at Griffith Prairie**

The Mid-Nebraska Trail Seekers Volkswalk Club is hosting a 5Km and 10Km Volkswalk event at Griffith Prairie and Farm. The walk is open to the public. AVA/IVV credit stamps are \$3; fun walkers fee is \$2. Start time is 8 a.m. until 12 p.m. Off the trail by 3 p.m. For more information contact Barbara Fletcher at 308-382-5962.