

A PRAIRIE IS...

We all know what a forest is or seashore, but to most of us a prairie is a weedy field or a western vista. The true prairies are complex and unique grasslands of great beauty and value.

The word prairie is French and means meadow. It was given to the grasslands by the early French explorers who had no other word for such a landscape and who were the first Europeans to visit that part of North America.

There are a number of definitions of prairie. One is that it is natural, North American grassland, generally possessing a deep and fertile soil, level or gently rolling and covered with perennial grasses and other herbaceous (non-woody) plants. There are almost no trees or other woody growth and the grasses are the larger part of the vegetative covering.

The prairie ecosystem developed after the last of the glaciers, which covered a large part of North America, retreated thousands of years ago. There were, however, a series of forest types before the prairie finally emerged as a climax community. It is believed that complex climatic changes were responsible for the shift from forest to prairie. Fires set by Native Americans to drive game and lightning strikes were the primary factors in maintaining the prairie ecosystem once it had matured. Experience has shown that without periodic burning the landscape slowly changes to one of shrubs and trees. Prairie management now includes prescribed burning to duplicate the natural and man-made fires. The prairie fires were hot and travel rapidly across the land. The grasses and broad leafed plants, called forbs, have very deep and large root systems and are without permanent above ground woody growth to be damaged by the fire while trees and other woody plants are destroyed. The animal population is disturbed very little. Birds will fly from the fire, animals run to safety or retreat into their burrows.

The roots of prairie plants are remarkable, 65% or more of the living matter in a prairie will be below ground storing food and water. These roots are the means of surviving prolonged drought, harsh winters,

fires and grazing. Most of the plants are perennial and have long life spans, sometimes up to decades.

Illinois was once about 65% covered by different types of prairie. A rough rule of thumb is 60% grasses and 40% forbs in a prairie but there are many exceptions. Because of the intensive farming and construction less than 1/100 of 1% of the original prairie landscape remains in scattered remnants.

THE PRAIRIE PLANTS HAVE VALUABLE USES

- They can be used for teaching the principles of ecology to everyone since they are a natural textbook that can be studied outdoors. Children, especially, like to be in a prairie. It is open and sunny with bright flowers and sturdy grasses. The plants are more child-sized than trees.
- They are a refuge for plants and wildlife. We need to preserve all forms of life and many plants and some animals are specific to the prairie.
- They have some potential in agriculture as pasture, fodder, forage, and as perennial grain crops.
- They can be used to prevent erosion since their root systems are wide and deep and hold down large quantities of soil. They are resistant to insects and can withstand harsh conditions since they are native and adapted to survival in this area.
- They can be used in residential gardens and commercial landscaping. They need no insecticide, watering, or fertilizing and very little weeding. The proper selection of plants will provide some in bloom all through the growing season. They are a beautiful natural garden needing little care. And, finally, they are an essential part of the world that gives us life.