

Plant Exchange

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BY BRENDA K. JOHNSON
P&D Correspondent

PRACTICING PRACTICAL AESTHETICS

Entranceway to any home, business, or institution is a presentation space for all who visit. Kim Schramm, landscape, arboretum and grounds manager at Wayne State College in Wayne, Nebraska, understands the importance of selecting the right plants as well as hardscape in an entrance area. In early July this season, he discussed his plant choices as we stand near a main campus entrance.

"We want to promote what Nebraska is," Schramm says. "You can't believe how fragrant the prairie drop seed is here in bloom." Stands of the airy native grass move in the morning breeze. Prairie drop seed is paired with substantial switch grass. Schramm has chosen plants for campus that grow in this USDA Zone 4 - sometimes 5A region, with growing conditions in common on both sides of the Missouri River Valley.

He says that only a third of the campus is irrigated and that this area is not automatically irrigated. It receives a lot of sunshine, has cement boundaries, and survives piles of snow, salt, and gravel from winter. The native grasses planted here have survived the 2012 drought and winter kill of recent years.

NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE PLANTS

In front of this campus entrance is a traffic roundabout with a center island a mixture of native and non-native plants.

"We like native and non-native plants (in some beds) because we want blooms for a longer time. We always go with heat and drought tolerant plants," he says. Purple coneflower, penstemon, salvia, daylilies, yarrow, reedgrass, landscape roses and goldenrod are planted in this circular bed with tallest plants in the center.

"By using more native plants we reduce our inputs. In 2012 we didn't water any of our flowerbeds," he says. Water usage decreased due to water conservation awareness and water rate increase.

"Our weather has been crazy. (A recent summer storm has just blown down forty trees on campus.) That's why we go with native plants too. They are adapted and have lived here thousands of years," he said. Vehicle drivers turning in the front entrance roundabout have a close look at what is in bloom now.

We pass through the entrance to what is now a wide sidewalk. Groups of students may stroll comfortably on what was formerly a campus roadway. This pedestrian boulevard with spacious green grass on either side now branches off to stately brick halls and other campus buildings.

A PEEK AT PRAIRIE

Along the campus walkway, three long sections of former roadbed were bermed with topsoil and are now a "mini-prairie." The rectangular space includes several campus buildings with the mini-prairie in front of them. Schramm developed the prairie sections six years ago.

Yellows, reds, purples and all shades of green are before us in this mini-prairie. Schramm invites the public to see these native flowers at three different times of the growing season to showcase the changing prairie. City of Wayne celebrates National Wildflower Week with banners downtown and we are drawn to this campus celebrating wildflowers.

Each full sun section of prairie is bordered with concrete walkway on three sides and a north-facing building behind. A green strip of native buffalo grass, about six inches tall, edges the prairie and is mowed to contrast with the meadow natural prairie.

"We're trying to mimic what Nebraska used to look like," he says. At this time, prairie poppy mallow, also called wine cup, a wine red flower is blooming near ground level, yellow false sunflowers brighten at eye level, and slender purple liatris nod when you walk past. Schramm has chosen these plants for blooms at different heights. These are planted among mid height or shorter grasses such as little blue stem, side oats gramma and blue gramma.

Schramm and his work crew start plugs of native grasses and wildflowers in a campus greenhouse about March. He prefers growing plugs when reasonable, to direct scatter seeding because identification of native plants versus weeds is difficult until plants are older. He also collects seed, saves



Kim Schramm is landscape, arboretum, and grounds manager at Wayne State College in Wayne, Nebraska. (Above) He selected native prairie drop seed and switch grass for plants at a main entrance to campus. The area does not have automatic irrigation. The native grasses there have survived drought in 2012 and winterkill in 2013. (Right Top) Schramm selects native or non-native plants that require low maintenance for flowerbeds around campus. He uses more non-natives if the area gets less than six hours of full sun a day. He also mixes native and non-native plants in a bed for color. Here he wanted short plants to go with the hardscape. (Right Middle) Clusters of wildflowers bloom in the mini-prairie between the walkway and along several buildings. This is a variety of false sunflower with red stems. Schramm and his crew set out native plants in plugs. Native plants often self-seed and produce more plants that fill in the space. (Bottom) Schramm selected native wildflowers with different heights for viewer enjoyment. Mini-prairie taller native wildflowers include this false sunflower variety (left) and prairie coneflowers (right) located at about eye level. (Photos: Brenda K. Johnson)



them in moist sand in labeled paper bags, and stores them in the refrigerator until he is ready to plant them.

Many native plants reseed themselves to produce new plants. Plants with more favorable environmental setting produce more plants, so the number and volume of varieties among wildflowers with native grasses has changed over these years. Schramm started the prairie sections with about 60 percent native grasses to 40 percent wildflowers.

"If I did a new (wildflower) planting, I'd go no less than 50 percent native grass," he says. He wants the amount of grasses to wildflowers to look natural as in a native setting.

"In areas around the campus not in full sun, we use more non-native plants. If (native) plants get six hours of full sun, that's enough," he says.

"We haven't managed this prairie, just pulled weeds, and let it do what it does," he says. Because native plants commonly reseed, they do get into other beds where they were not planted.

Schramm says that the prairie sections were fertilized when they were initially planted but not again. Mini-prairie receives no irrigation and no pesticide; very low inputs.

"In spring we weed-eat the native grass and wildflowers. Burning it would be hard on campus," he says. Instead they leave most of the plant material on site as mulch.

"We let the plants stand in winter. We see coneflowers above the snow," he says. He comments on butterflies and other native

pollinators that are drawn to the prairie about the time students reappear in fall. He has planted yarrow, butterfly weed, sunflowers and asters for plenty of fall flower display as well as spring blooms such as prairie smoke, pasque flowers and prairie onions. That way students enjoy the prairie plants fall and spring, and campus summer institute and special events participants enjoy the summer prairie flowers.

"We get our plants from Blue Bird Nursery where they field test these plants," he says. "We also get plants from the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum and they grow them in the region. We're members of the state arboretum. A research consortium from Lincoln sends trial plants that we try out and report back. We also get seed from Stock Seed Company." These suppliers are all within 150 miles of his campus so that native seeds have the genetics of the region.

Schramm's background includes many years of conservation and horticulture, which have influenced his decade of work at Wayne State College. He has the support of the "Campus Beautification Committee" and his administration. He realizes that when people see the native prairie look that they love what it represents or think it's a weed patch. His wildflower walks with the public in summer are a way for the community to see the importance of the native grasses and wildflowers on campus.

"Here right in front of you, you can see what Nebraska is and what survives every day," Schramm said. "We like no inputs - no fertilizer, no pesticides, no expensive water," he said.

January Plant Tips

Lisa Kortan is an urban forester at the Yankton Parks & Recreation. She manages the public Yankton Arboretum, which is located on the hillside behind the Summit Center and Yankton High School. Diverse trees line either side of this popular walking trail. Labels show tree information. Trees in the arboretum are irrigated, and grow along the hilltop in loam soil with a down slope for watering. Most of the trees are full sun and have hilltop exposure to the north wind. Area is spacious and trees are set apart so each tree can achieve its natural shape under these environmental conditions. Trees of the arboretum display features in all four seasons. Lisa selected three trees to highlight, though many other trees are also favorites. Kortan mentions trees that she'd like to plant in her yard at home. When Kortan adds trees to the arboretum, she conservatively looks for USDA hardiness to Zone 3 or 4, and

seeks drought tolerant trees, recalling the recent drought. Observing trees throughout the season, and as they grow naturally in an arboretum, are ways to discover new favorite trees that may suit your growing conditions at home. Trees! An Illustrated Field Guide by John Ball is an additional resource for these tips.

- Kentucky Coffee tree. In the winter you can hear the black seedpods rattle. Pods look like blackbirds in the tree. Rough bark of the tree trunk and soft spring foliage is such a contrast. You can find male trees if pods are a nuisance. Branches are naturally well spaced so little pruning is needed. Few diseases or insect pests bother this native tree. Kentucky Coffee tree adapts to neutral or alkaline, dry or moist soil. Seedpods are no longer poisonous after heat treatment. Early settlers used roasted beans for coffee.
- Ohio Buckeye tree. Creamy white clusters of flowers are found on the tree in



PHOTO: BRENDA K. JOHNSON
Smooth seeds of the Ohio buckeye tree are a creative outlet for children and a source of food for squirrels. Ohio Buckeye is a favorite of city arborist Lisa Kortan, who manages the Yankton Arboretum.

spring. Kortan collected smooth buckeyes as a child. Squirrels eat them. Buckeye isn't a common tree in Yankton but is a hardy USDA Zone 4a tree. The medium size tree grows better in neutral soil. Leaves turn yellow in short fall color. Tree is early to leaf out in spring.

- 'Autumn Blaze' Freeman

Maple tree. Cross between a red and silver maple, the tree does break up in storms, but is a fast growing tree, is hardy, and can tolerate alkaline soil. This cultivar is popular and has excellent red fall color. Tree branches naturally turn upwards, requiring less pruning for mowing maintenance.

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