

Prairie Restoration and Towne Park

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Who cares about flowers? Apparently we do!

Many of the MMN volunteers at the Nature Explore Classroom area of the Towne Park site have remarked on the acres of wildflowers blooming in the adjacent fields.

How did they get there? Wasn't the area once farmland that sat idle for several years? Did these flower seeds lay dormant in the ground just waiting for a chance to germinate? No way!

For those of you who have more than a passing interest in restoring old farmlands to a condition that will support a wealth of pollinators, insects, birds and other wildlife - keep reading...The flowers in question are a direct result of the efforts of Ben Grossman and his staff at the Saint Charles County Parks and Recreation department.

For a more detailed discussion of an approach to reconstructing a tall grass prairie, refer to the Shaw Nature Reserve native landscaping manual at the following website
<http://www.shawnature.org/nativelandscapingmanual/ChapterOne.aspx>

Part of the process involves setting a goal for the restoration. At Towne Park, Ben's objective was to manage for quail and other wildlife. This involves a consideration of plantings that provide seed food, a habitat for food and pollinators (insects), and cover for the targeted animal species.

As the goals were identified, the site was evaluated. According to Ben, the site was a crop field years ago, but has been mowed annually ever since. The site was evaluated for existing vegetation and a decision was made to eradicate grasses and broad-leaf weeds (existing undesirable plants) through multiple applications of glysohate, the preferred method under the circumstances. In all, 3 applications of glysohate were employed. Invasive woody plants were also removed.

A seed mix was designed for the area. Seeding design begins with species selection. Given the goals for the site, and the characteristics of the area, Ben designed a seed mix that was 60% forbs (herbaceous flowering plants) and 40% grass. A different mix was employed in the Savannah area,

where Eastern Red Cedar trees were removed. The seed was provided by a commercial seed company as per Ben's specifications.

Early winter is the optimum time to sow seeds (by hand). This allows the seed time to break dormancy and germinate after sufficient application of cold temperatures (stratification). Without stratification, seeds germinate at the wrong time and do not often survive the winter. Ben's team sowed while there was snow on the ground, which made it easier to see where you are walking, how well the coverage is, and the snow helps draw the seed to the ground.

This year is the first year of plant growth. Typically the establishment of the native species will take 1-3 years for most seedlings to germinate, establish good roots, flower, and overcome initial weeds. It's too soon to tell how successful the plantings will be in the long run. Ben has observed a lot of thistle that was not seen last year, and it will be troublesome to eliminate.

So, the next time that you are volunteering at the NEC site, take a good look at the progress that has been made so far, and think about how big a difference we can make with just a little effort.

Ben has also offered to have a short advanced training session at the site if we would like. MMN chapter members please send me an email if you would like me to pursue setting up a short session with Ben for sometime in the future.