Native Plant Planting & Care Guide

A complete guide to establishing and caring for your Wisconsin native plants

PrairieTech, LLC.

Native Plant Landscaping & Nursery

goprairietech.com • plants@goprairietech.com

Thank you for choosing PrairieTech. Whether this is your first native planting or an addition to an existing garden, this guide will walk you through every stage, from preparing your site to maintaining a thriving native landscape for years ahead. The information here reflects best practices for Wisconsin's climate and soil conditions.

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1. SITE PREPARATION

A well-prepared site gives your plants the best possible start. If the area you intend to plant is currently covered in lawn grass or other established vegetation, it will need to be addressed before any plants go in the ground. Three practical approaches are described below, choose whichever suits your site, schedule, and preferences.

Option A: Sheet Mulching (Smothering)

Lay a continuous covering of black plastic sheeting, a heavy canvas tarp, or several overlapping layers of cardboard across the entire planting area. The goal is to block all sunlight, killing the grass and roots beneath. One of the advantages of this approach is that the soil beneath remains largely undisturbed, which means dormant weed seeds buried in the soil stay buried, greatly reducing weed germination in your new garden.

- **Best suited for:** Areas with modest weed pressure where you prefer minimal digging.
- **Timing:** Start in early spring. The covering must stay in place for an entire growing season. Plan to install your plants the following fall once vegetation beneath is fully dead.

Option B: Sod Removal

A sod cutter (available at most equipment rental shops) or a sturdy flat spade can be used to slice through and remove the top 2 to 3 inches of grass and root mat. After the sod is stripped away, give the exposed soil a light till to loosen it before planting. This method works best when the existing lawn is relatively weed-free, since it exposes the soil surface and can bring weed seeds to light.

- **Best suited for:** Clean, low-weed lawns with defined borders.
- Stripped sod can be flipped upside-down and composted, it makes excellent material once broken down.

Option C: Repeated Cultivation

Till the planting area thoroughly, then wait one week and till again. Repeat this a third time after another week. The repeated disturbance causes a fresh flush of weed seeds to germinate and then be destroyed with each subsequent pass, gradually depleting the seedbank in the upper soil layer.

- **Lighter soils (sandy or loam):** You can typically begin the first pass in early to mid spring.
- **Heavier clay soils:** Wait until mid-to-late spring before tilling. Clay worked while wet compacts and loses its structure, causing problems for roots long-term.

2. INSTALLING YOUR PLANTS

Spring and fall are both excellent times to plant native perennials in Wisconsin. Summer installation is possible but requires more diligent watering to counteract heat stress. Whenever you plant, the steps below apply.

Arrange Before You Dig

Before reaching for a shovel, set each plant, still in its container, in the approximate spot where it will be installed. Step back, assess the layout, and make adjustments. It is far easier to shift a pot a few feet than to move a plant after it has gone in the ground.

> **TIP:** *On larger jobs, work in manageable sections rather than laying out every plant at once. This keeps the stock that has not yet been planted out of direct sun and wind.*

Step-by-Step Planting

1. Dig each hole a bit wider than the plug, and just deep enough so the top of the plug will sit at, or a hair above, the surrounding soil surface.
2. Tip the plant out of its pot and inspect the roots. If they are tightly circling the inside of the container, gently loosen or score them so they can spread outward into the surrounding soil.
3. Lower the plant into the hole and confirm the depth. The base of the stem, the crown, should never be buried below grade.
4. Return the soil you removed back into the hole around the root ball, pressing it in gently to remove large air pockets without compacting it.
5. Give each plant a thorough initial watering immediately after planting to settle the soil and begin root-to-soil contact.

3. MULCHING

Spreading mulch right after installation is a simple step that pays significant dividends. It reduces how quickly the soil dries out between waterings, keeps roots cooler during summer heat, and slows the germination of annual weeds while your plants are still getting established.

Application Guidelines

- Spread 1 to 3 inches of mulch across the entire planting bed right after plants are in the ground.
- Leave a gap of 2 to 3 inches around the base of each plant's stem. Mulch piled directly against stems holds moisture against the crown and can encourage rot.
- Skip the landscape fabric. It tends to prevent native plants from self-seeding naturally, interferes with soil organisms, and becomes difficult to manage as it breaks down.

Good Mulch Choices for Native Plantings

Material	Notes
Weed-free straw	A reliable all-around choice, easy to spread, lets water through readily, breaks down within a season to add organic matter
Shredded dry leaves	An excellent and free option; particularly well suited to woodland-edge or shade plantings
Dry grass clippings	Useful but apply in thin layers only, a deep layer will mat together and repel rather than absorb rainfall

Fine shredded wood mulch	Works well if ground finely. Coarse bark mulch is best avoided as it can take years to break down and may tie up nitrogen in the process

4. WATERING & ESTABLISHMENT

The first full growing season after installation is when your plants are most vulnerable. They are adjusting from a container environment to open ground, and their root systems have not yet spread far enough to access moisture independently. Attentive watering during this period is the most direct way to support successful establishment.

Watering in Year One

- Check the soil around each plant regularly. When the top inch or two feels dry, it is time to water.
- When you do water, water slowly and thoroughly. A deep soak that moistens the soil several inches down is far more beneficial than a quick spray across the surface. Deep watering draws roots downward, which is exactly where you want them.
- Early morning is the ideal time to water. Less water is lost to evaporation, and foliage dries quickly through the day, reducing the chance of fungal problems.
- Newly installed plants in containers have a smaller root zone and can dry out faster than surrounding soil might suggest. Pay close attention during the first few weeks, especially in warm or windy weather.

TIP: *If you are unsure whether to water, press a finger into the soil a couple of inches down near the plant's base. Dry soil means it is time to water; moist soil means you can wait.*

Year Two and Beyond

Native plants are remarkable in how self-sufficient they become once their root systems are established. By the second growing season, most will require little to no supplemental water under normal Wisconsin rainfall patterns. If a genuine drought stretches on for two weeks or more without meaningful rain, a single thorough watering will support even well-established plants through the dry stretch.

5. LONG-TERM CARE & MAINTENANCE

A mature native planting asks very little of you compared to a conventional garden. The maintenance tasks below are light-touch practices that keep things looking their best while supporting the ecological function of your landscape.

Managing Weeds Early On

The first two growing seasons require the most active weed management. As your native plants grow and fill in, they will begin to shade out much of the competition on their own, but while they are

still small, unwanted plants can gain ground quickly. Pull weeds by hand while the soil is damp, which makes root removal much easier. If you are unsure whether a seedling is a weed or a native volunteer, leave it for another week or two until it is easier to identify.

Cutting Back & Deadheading

Each spring, cut last season's growth back to the ground before fresh shoots emerge, typically late March through April in our region. This refreshes the planting and makes way for new growth. Deadheading (removing spent flowers mid-season) can prompt additional blooming in some species, but it is not necessary. We strongly encourage leaving seed heads and spent stems standing through the winter months: they provide food for birds during a lean time of year and shelter for overwintering native bees.

Dividing Plants

After three to five years, some perennials form dense clumps that benefit from being split apart. Division refreshes the plant, improves flowering, and gives you additional plants to spread elsewhere in the garden. The best window for dividing is early spring, just as new growth begins to emerge. Dig the whole clump, pull or cut it into sections, each with a healthy portion of root, and replant them at the same depth they were growing before.

Natural Spreading

Over time, many native species will colonize the area around them through seed or underground runners. This is entirely normal and one of the things that gives a native planting its naturalistic character. Where spreading is welcome, simply let it happen. Where it exceeds your intended borders, a quick edit in spring keeps things tidy.

6. SEASONAL CARE AT A GLANCE

Season	Key Tasks
Spring (Mar–May)	Cut back previous year's growth before new growth emerges. Divide any overcrowded clumps. Install new plants once soil is workable. Weed early and often while weeds are still small.
Summer (Jun–Aug)	Water newly installed plants consistently. Deadhead if a second flush of bloom is desired. Pull any weeds that escaped spring attention before they set seed.
Fall (Sep–Nov)	An ideal planting window, cooler temperatures and seasonal rain ease establishment. Leave seed heads standing for wildlife. Taper off watering as plants prepare for dormancy. Supplemental leaf mulch applications are something you can also consider (or just rake your leaves onto the planting).

Winter (Dec–Feb)	No maintenance needed. Standing stems and seed heads serve as wildlife habitat and add quiet structural interest to the winter garden.

Have questions about your plants or your planting plan? We would love to hear from you.

Reach us at plants@goprairietech.com
Based in Dane County, WI, Serving all of Wisconsin
goprairietech.com