

Give your plot the prairie look!

We show you how to create the perfect bed with a magical, naturalistic feel

Now's the time to think about your borders. Cast your mind back to last summer and how they performed. Sometimes flower beds can become 'spotty' with splashes of interest here and there but no real cohesion. Or is your garden dominated by lawn? Is there an area that, given a rethink now, could be a glorious

cocktail of colour from summer into autumn?

Prairie planting in a garden context is inspired by the great plains of the American Midwest. Garden heroes like Dutch designer Piet Oudolf have helped hone the palette of plants to what succeeds in the British climate and widened it to include many from other geographic regions.

While we should all adhere to the mantra of 'right plant, right place' we can interpret wild plant communities to suit our needs. Most of us don't have the acreage to re-create the vast mixed perennial planting schemes that wow visitors at the likes of Trentham Gardens and the Sussex Prairie Garden but we can do more than nod at their grandeur.



WORDS: JIN CABLE. PHOTOS: ALAMY, SHUTTERSTOCK, GAZ.

The key elements

Your pocket-sized prairie needs to be sited in a sunny, open spot in an area around 5x5m (16½x16½ft) to achieve a repetition in planting. This could be an irregular island bed or a more formal square or perfect circle. A strip of 2x12m (6½x40ft) can also work. What will distinguish your pocket of prairie from an herbaceous border is the limited palette of plants, the inclusion of a fair proportion of grasses and a certain amount of deliberate intermingling of the occupants. While a traditional border tends to have the taller plants at the back (or middle if it's an island bed) this modern style has no such hierarchy, with the plant profile undulating and relying to some extent on airy, see-through plants such as *Molinia caerulea* and *Verbena bonariensis*.



A bench within the planting draws attention to the detail

Prairie palettes

It's sensible to use plants that you know do well in your conditions, so without being too prescriptive, here are a couple of possible planting recipes for inspiration. In a small area it's important to restrict yourself to a narrow range of plants with several sweeps of each and five to nine in each drift. Allow 10 plants in 9cm (¾in) pots per square metre on average.

A hot and sultry scheme



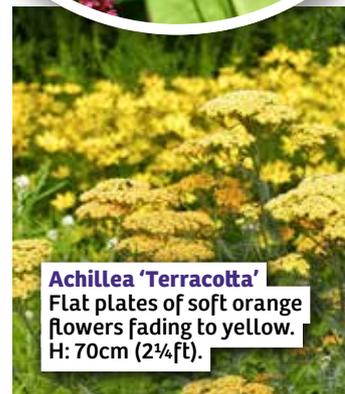
Helenium 'Sahin's Early Flowerer'
Rich mahogany, gold and orange daisies. H: 90cm (3ft).



Sanguisorba 'Tanna'
Blue-grey foliage and dark red blooms. H: 50cm (1¾ft).



Persicaria amplexicaulis 'Blackfield'
Slender spikes of deep red flowers H: 1m (3¼ft).



Achillea 'Terracotta'
Flat plates of soft orange flowers fading to yellow. H: 70cm (2¼ft).



'Prairie' planting knits together beautifully using soft grasses and similar colours

Something cool and romantic...



Amsonia hubrichtii
Dove-blue, starry flowers above willowy foliage that turns bright yellow in autumn. H: 70cm (2¼ft).



Allium lusitanicum
Swaying round heads of soft lilac flowers. H: 40cm (1¼ft).



Perovskia 'Blue Spire'
Tiny, violet-blue flowers cover silvery spikes. H: 80cm (2¾ft).



Hylotelephium 'Matrona'
Purple-flushed, succulent leaves and flat heads of soft pink flowers. H: 70cm (2¼ft).

Continues over the page

Preparing your patch

Remove all existing plants and discard, re-home or put aside, with rootballs wrapped in hessian, for later division and replanting. Herbaceous perennials benefit from being divided, and now's the time to go for it. It's particularly important to completely eradicate any perennial weeds at this stage. Most prairie plants hate having 'wet feet' in winter so break up any underlying compaction and add grit if your soil's very heavy.



Weed well in preparation and de-compact the soil

Planting

This is the fun bit! It's a good idea to sketch out the new border, roughly to scale, and then mark out the swathes of each component, aiming to have contrasting heights, textures and colours next to one another. Scale this up to the real thing by marking out the patches with lines of dry sand on your prepared soil. Place the plants, whether from divisions, pots or modules, in their zones and blur the edges by intermingling them a bit. When you're happy (and remember there are no hard and fast rules here so relax!) then you can get planting. Water your plants in. In the long run, suitable plants tend to be very drought tolerant but watering might be needed during the perennials' first season, if the weather is dry, while they establish.



Intermingle your plants and soften with grasses



Try a scheme of prairie planting in a raised bed

Aftercare

If you get the preparation and planting right this should be minimal compared to a more traditional bed. Cut back perennials and deciduous grasses to near ground level in spring before the new growth cycle begins again. The chopped-up plant material can be composted or spread over the prairie patch as a surface mulch. At the same time remove any weeds that have crept in, which is more likely in the early years when there are gaps. Later in the prairie's life you may need to replace and divide some of the constituents.



This panicum grass is getting a chop back to ground level before new growth starts

TIPS

- Growing from seed is a cost-effective option but restricts you to those perennials and grasses available as seed. Sow into module trays of multi-purpose compost now. Grow on in a greenhouse or cold frame, then harden off and plant out the plugs later in spring in your prepared bed.
- The closer you plant at the outset the quicker the plants will mesh together, which reduces weeding during the establishment phase.
- You can extend the season of a prairie style border by adding spring-flowering bulbs such as snowdrops, *Iris reticulata*, dwarf narcissi and camassias and perennials such as primroses and aquilegias that don't compete for space too much.
- In a small area it's best to avoid giants like eupatoriums and choose plants that reach 30cm-1m (1-3¼ft) at their peak season.
- In the first year or two scattering annual flower seeds and lightly raking them in to infill the gaps between plants can be very effective. Think poppies, cornflowers or cosmos.



Don't plant giants in small areas