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NATIVE NEWS

Spence Restoration Nursery

Blending Native Plant Communities into the Landscape

The most frequent complaint about native plant communities is their "unkempt" appearance. While native plant communities are inherently informal, proper design techniques can greatly enhance public acceptance. Most important of these techniques are selecting appropriately scaled plants for the situation, designing and maintaining buffers between the planting and infrastructure, and annual maintenance of the planting.

Utilization of plants appropriately scaled to the planting is a key design principle. The fierce competition present in native plant communities, especially those that occur on fertile soils, has led these plants to evolve impressive size for herbaceous species. When freed from that completion and planted in a prepared landscape soil, they frequently grow very robustly, and lodge badly when they are unable to support their large size. Grasses and composites of the tallgrass prairie are particularly prone to this problem. Therefore, species that exceed three feet in height should not be used to small planting beds, small rain gardens, or parking lot islands. Fortunately, there are a great diversity of sedges and grasses such as prairie dropseed that fit nicely into smaller scale plantings. Choose short sturdy forbs such as Iris, Penstemons, Mountain Mint, and Showy Black-Eyed Susan for smaller scale rain gardens.

In order to give your planting an intentional appearance, it is vital to design buffers between naturalized landscapes and infrastructure such as sidewalks, drives, and buildings. This will prevent your planting from being perceived as an unmaintained area. This can be accomplished in a couple of ways. The first method is a designed mown strip between the infrastructure and the naturalized planting. It should be a scaled to be the width of the mowing equipment. The second method is to transition to the informal mixed planting with a monoculture of a neat graminoid such as Prairie Dropseed, Tufted Hairgrass, or a sedge. Occasionally there are situations where a naturalized planting may not be a good fit in an otherwise formal landscape. In this case, storm water practice can utilize a monoculture or low diversity graminoid planting like the above transition buffer. You may need to use two or more species to accommodate the different moisture levels within the BMP.

Annual maintenance is vital to the appearance of a native planting. Weeds can quickly turn a native planting into an eyesore. Removal of weeds in rain gardens, parking lot islands and other high visibility plug plantings should be scheduled at least 3 times during the growing season. Any accumulated trash or debris should also be removed during these weeding visits. It is also imperative to have a dormant season cleanup at the end of each growing season. This cleanup should consist of cutting back the plants to within a couple of inches of their crowns, followed by raking and removing the clippings. This can be done between November and March, however, I like to leave the grasses standing until March for winter interest.

New Catalog Available on Our Website

Our updated catalog is now available on our website. Included in the update is an expanded rain garden plant table on pages 35 and 36. It includes columns for inundation tolerance, salt tolerance, and drought tolerance. Also included are four seed mixes not listed in our previous catalog which are the soil stabilization mix, bioswale mix, emergent wetland mix, and the wet- tolerant low stature mix. New species included in this catalog include Water Sedge (Carex aquatilis), Fen-Panicled Sedge (Carex prairea), Downy Skullcap (Scutellaria incana), and Prairie Sundrops (Oenothera pilosella).

Oenothera pilosella

Scutellaria incana

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