

NATIVE NEWS

DEVELOPMENT MAINTENANCE PART II – PLUGS

There are several vital maintenance procedures that should take place to insure successful establishment of a native plug installation. These include watering, mulch maintenance, weeding, and monitoring for replacements.

Recent summer droughts underscore the importance of including a watering schedule in your specifications. Native plugs should receive one inch of water per week for the first 8 weeks. More may be required the first 2 weeks following installation and during extreme periods of heat and drought. Plantings should however, be allowed to dry 2-3 days between each watering to prevent the soil under mulch from becoming waterlogged. Plug plantings not receiving mulch (not recommended) will require up to twice as much water.

Mulch is strongly recommended for plug plantings. Not only does it conserve moisture, it greatly reduces annual weed pressure during establishment. If plugs are placed at an appropriately high density of 1 foot centers or less, renewing the mulch after the second year may not be required as the established plants should completely cover the ground. Finely shredded hardwood mulch should be utilized in storm water BMPs while leaf compost is recommended for upland situations. Although it has the least tendency to float, even the fine shredded hardwood may move around, especially when it is newly installed, so be sure to check it after heavy rainfall events to ensure that the mulch is not covering the plants. In all situations, the mulch should be placed no more than 2 inches deep.

Even with proper mulch installation, there will always be a least a few annual weeds, especially in year one. Maintenance should include visiting the site once a month during the growing season to remove weeds. Be certain not to allow problematic perennial weeds such as Canada thistle and Canada goldenrod to establish during the first two growing seasons.

If you start with vigorous well-established plugs, survival should be near 100% if the above steps are followed. However, extreme weather events such as drought or flooding may result in some losses, especially in storm water BMPs. If there are losses, it is important to note if there is a pattern to which species were lost. Designers and installers should have the flexibility to replace species that do not survive with a better suited alternative.

PLANT FEATURE: LITTLE BLUESTEM (*SCHIZACHYRIUM SCOPARIUM*)

Native to most of the lower 48 states, [Little Bluestem](#) is a widespread and adaptable prairie grass common throughout the Midwest. It is one of the dominant species of dry prairies, however it is not restricted to dry sites, also occurring in wet prairies and even fens. Consequently, it is adaptable to almost any sunny site that is not inundated. This warm season grass grows around 3 feet tall, typically reaching its mature height in early August. In September, the seeds begin to take on a fluffy appearance as they dry, which is especially attractive when backlit. The culms turn red in the fall, fading to a reddish brown that persists through the winter. The culms typically remain upright, even in the snow, providing excellent winter interest.

At Spence Restoration Nursery, we produce seeds from two different genotypes, both originating here in Indiana. The first genotype originates from a typical dry sand prairie habitat in Jasper County in the northwest part of the state. The more noteworthy genotype originates from a fen in Henry County where it grows in saturated marl soils. The second genotype is particularly well adapted to plantings in heavy soils that may be wet in the spring. It is an essential component of our Wet Tolerant Low Stature Prairie seed mix. Customers are welcome to request this unique genotype in other seed mixes as well. It also grows fine in well-drained upland soils.

In a restoration, Little Bluestem should be included in all prairie mixes with a wide variety of other prairie grasses and forbs appropriate to the soils and hydrology of the site.



Harvest of our wet-tolerant Little Bluestem