



Planting Native Wildflower and Native Grass Seed on Sandy Upland Sites – Manistee Conservation District

WHY PLANT THEM? Native wildflowers and grasses provide habitat for pollinators and other wildlife, and can add a visually stunning addition to your landscape!

SITE SELECTION – Choose a site that is already free of woody plants such as trees and shrubs, or that contains trees and shrubs at a wide spacing (at least 60 feet apart). Choose a site that receives full sunlight for at least half the day. Choose a site with well-drained soil.

PREPARING THE SITE – We recommend that you spend at least one full growing season preparing the site before planting the native seed. You can prepare the site using a variety of methods, including mowing the weeds followed by herbicide application to kill the weeds that “green up” in response to being mowed; mowing the weeds followed by solarization to cook the weeds (covering the area with UV stabilized plastic); or repeated tilling of the weeds (only till a few inches deep and no deeper). Cover crops (seed depth and pounds per acre vary by species) can also be incorporated.

SPECIES SELECTION – Choose wildflowers and grasses adapted to your site. Choose wildflower mixtures that represent a range of bloom periods from early summer to early autumn (the mixture sold by the Manistee Conservation District provides this range of bloom periods and is adapted to sandy upland sites). Also, the grass seed typically sold by the Manistee Conservation District (big bluestem and little bluestem) is adapted to sandy upland sites.

WHEN TO PLANT – In Northwest Lower Peninsula Michigan, we recommend planting in mid-May to early June (spring seeding), or in November (autumn seeding).

SOIL TEST – Just prior to planting the native seed, after you have prepared the site, we suggest you get a soil test from a local lab or from Michigan State University Extension (visit <https://homesoiltest.msu.edu/>) to determine nutrient availability and pH of your soil. Fertilization is typically not needed if you match the native species to the soil type; lime may sometimes help increase the pH to a more desirable level and help with nutrient availability.

PLANTING METHOD AND SEEDBED – If you are spreading the native wildflower and native grass seed by hand, make sure that at least 50% bare soil is present for good seed to soil contact at the time of planting. For larger projects (several acres and larger), you may use a no-till drill to drill the seed directly into the soil, even where a cover crop is currently growing.

HOW MUCH SEED? There are MANY OPINIONS about this. We recommend a total of ~12 pounds per acre (this DOES NOT INCLUDE the carrier or any cover crop seed). You can mix native wildflowers and native grasses at different ratios to yield a total of ~12 pounds per acre. At this rate, one pound covers ~3,600 square feet (~60 feet by ~60 feet), four ounces covers ~1,000 square feet (~32 feet by ~32 feet), and one ounce covers ~225 square feet (~15 feet by ~15 feet).

HAND PLANTING SEED WITH A CARRIER – If you are spreading the seed by hand, we recommend that you mix the native seed with an inert carrier or with a cover crop acting as a carrier. Effective inert carriers include sand (sterile sand only), sawdust, and rice hulls. Oats is an effective cover crop carrier (the oats will germinate but can be mowed as described under FOLLOW UP). The volume of carrier should be at least (and often more) than the volume of the native seed. The carrier helps weigh down the light, fluffy native seed. Mix the native seed with the carrier and spread it across your site ensuring that the entire planting area is covered. Be sure the depth of the native seed is no deeper than 0.25 inch. Use a machine cultipacker or lawn roller to flatten the ground and ensure good seed to soil contact.

IRRIGATION AND FERTILIZATION – Fertilization should typically not be necessary. Liming may be necessary to adjust the pH (refer to recommendations from your soil test results). If planting in mid-May to early June, irrigation can help with germination and early growth.

FOLLOW UP – BE PATIENT! The planting will not look pretty for the first couple of years. During the first year (the first growing season when the native wildflower and native grass seed begins to germinate), when the vegetation reaches 12 inches or taller, mow it back to a height of ~6 inches. At the beginning of the second year, rake away debris in early spring then mow down annual and biennial weeds throughout the growing season. If, by the end of the second year more than 75% of your planting area is dominated by weeds, you may need to re-seed, overseed, or start over. Longer term maintenance (year three and after) can involve using prescribed fire or mowing.



QUESTIONS?

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