



Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

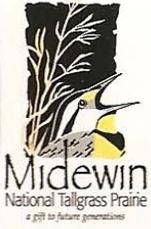
Wildflowers & Grasses of Midewin

Funding for this brochure was contributed by the National Forest Foundation, Recreational Equipment, Inc., Mobil Foundation, Midewin Tallgrass Prairie Alliance, and Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

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The Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is a member of Chicago Wilderness, a coalition of more than 100 agencies, organizations, and institutions that have come together to help assure the future of the natural biological wealth of the region.





Welcome to the Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie. Midwin was established in 1996 as the first national tallgrass prairie in the country. It is administered by the USDA Forest Service, in close cooperation with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the support of hundreds of volunteers and partner agencies, businesses, and organizations.

The Illinois Land Conservation Act mandated four guiding purposes for Midwin's management:

- To conserve and enhance native populations and habitats of fish, wildlife, and plants;
- To provide for scientific, environmental and land use education and research;
- To allow agricultural use to continue under certain conditions; and
- To provide a variety of recreation opportunities.

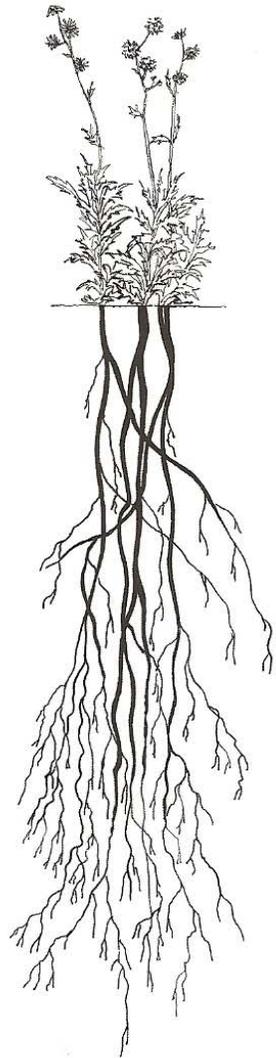
As the largest portion of the peacetime conversion of the former Joliet Army Ammunition Plant, Midwin represents the largest prairie restoration attempted in the United States. Located just 40 miles south of Chicago, it also represents an unprecedented opportunity for urban dwellers to experience the wide open spaces that characterized the Prairie State 200 years ago.

The Prairie

At one time, prairies dominated over 60% of the landscape in Illinois. Tallgrass prairie once covered millions of acres of land from Canada to Texas, and from Nebraska to the Great Lakes. Favored with more rainfall than the shorter, mixed-grass prairies and Great Plains to the west, tallgrass prairie was characterized by rich and diverse plant life. In some areas, the grasses grew nearly to the height of a horse and rider, while other areas featured shorter grasses and hundreds of species of wildflowers.

Most of the living material in a prairie ecosystem is below ground in roots, microbes, insects, and other burrowing animals. The activities of these organisms, over the millennia, created the deep, rich topsoil of the Midwest. Once the fertility of the soil was discovered, tallgrass prairie practically disappeared in the space of 50 years, converted to crops and to pastures for domestic livestock.

Today, less than one hundredth of one percent of true tallgrass prairie remains in Illinois. Pristine tallgrass prairie is the rarest of North America's major biomes.



Prairie Restoration at Midewin

The Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is not currently prairie. In fact, less than 3% is in natural plant communities. Large areas of Midewin are used for cultivated row crops, hay, or cattle grazing, which maintain the land in good condition and provide grassland bird habitat until it can be restored to native plants. Aggressive, nonnative weeds are a problem in some areas. Other areas consist of grasslands, shrublands, and thickets.

Restoring prairie at this scale will require many years—decades—and a vast amount and variety of native plant seed. No one knows exactly how all the diverse components of a prairie ecosystem work together because we have only small pieces left to study. So much of what happens at Midewin will be an ongoing experiment, learning by trial and error how to gradually regain our natural heritage in Illinois.

A major strategy of the restoration process at Midewin is to produce our own plant seed. Three native seed production gardens and several grass fields have been established and are tended by a truly dedicated volunteer workforce. Eventually, we will be able to produce seed for hundreds of native plant species.

How to Use This Brochure

Although there are few native plant communities to study at Midewin today, you can use this identification guide in one of our native seed production gardens, or for individual plants here and at other natural sites in the Prairie Parklands or Chicago Wilderness.

Please enjoy all wildflowers and grasses where they are growing. Do not remove the plants, flowers, or seeds—they're needed to continue the task of restoring the prairie.

The wildflowers and grasses in this brochure are common in north-eastern Illinois, but this is not a comprehensive list of all tallgrass prairie plants.

The following listings begin with the average height of the plant, then its blooming season, followed by a description of its distinguishing characteristics.

A short glossary of terms that will be helpful includes:

Panicle:

A compound raceme.

Raceme: Elongated flower cluster.

Stamen: The pollen bearing organ of the flower.

Disk Flowers: Small, tubular flowers in the center of a flowerhead.

Ray Flowers:

Resemble one flower petal.

measurements

above each photo are the size of the plants

circles

above photos indicate relative size of flowers

- small
less than 1 inch wide or long
- medium
1-2 inches wide or long
- large
more than 2 inches wide or long

References Used

*Prairie Plants of the Midwest:
Identification and Ecology,*
by Russell R. Kirt

Tallgrass Prairie Wildflowers,
by Doug Ladd

Plants of the Chicago Region, by Floyd Swink
and Gerould Wilhelm

Grasses: An Identification Guide,
by Lauren Brown

Illinois Plant Information Network
www.fs.fed.us/ne/delaware/ilpin/ilpin.html

Acknowledgements

All photos courtesy of Bill Glass.

Our thanks to Russ Kirt for review
of this brochure.

Our thanks to Denise Wurl for her work
in developing the Midewin logo.

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