



## *What to do when your native plant garden feels somewhat...messy!*

I'm here to remind you that your natural garden doesn't have to look...

Dare I say it?

Messy. Am I allowed to say that?

Here's a quick story to explain what I mean. It's about 8 years ago, and I'm looking at a native plant garden with my client. I had meticulously chosen suitable plants for his space, with all season interest, lots of diversity, AND made sure they were pollinator favourites.

And he is thrilled! It is finally in full growth, life is happening, the bees and butterflies are visiting, and it feels so good to be a part of that....

But wait...something feels like it's missing.

90% of insects, including pollinators, require a native plant host to complete their life cycle, and I am clearly a native plant advocate, so how can there be anything better than supporting that?

And, yes it may seem a little messy, but I am supposed to be okay with that. It means we're finally embracing nature into our home landscapes. So, why do I feel a little disappointed? Nature is not neat and tidy is she?



Maybe not, but she does have subtle patterns over the large scale. And from a distance, the detail of a prairie melts into larger drifts of color and texture. And, I don't know about you, but I often get that sense of awe and feeling of peace when I view a natural landscape from a distance.

Having a garden look and feel more natural and attract pollinators is extremely important, but so is having a garden that recharges you and pulls you to spend more time in it. I believe this is crucial for us in a time when we need to develop a better relationship with Mother Nature.

So how can you work towards a garden that pulls you in?

After several years of creating native plant gardens, I've come across a few tricks to help gardens capture the beauty of a natural landscape. Here is one thing I now include in almost every design which helps immensely!

### Natural Plant Drifts for Every Season.

Sound familiar? Read on learn how to choose plants that will help keep your theme looking great! *Or scroll to the bottom to see a list of suggested plants.*

- 1) **For each season, pick either one flower or grass that speaks to you! (Or two for very large gardens).** Many prairie plants bloom for about 4-6 weeks out of the year, so you'll want to pick 3 or 4 favorites that span spring, summer and fall.
- 2) **Take each type and plant them in one or two large drifts, as nature does.** Making sure to give them enough space to grow to their full potential. **This should span 45-50% of your garden space.** They will act like a beacon to let pollinators know food is available. Only planting 2 of everything will be fun at first, but will end up creating a patchwork of plants and their beauty will get lost at a distance. I know! I've done it too. For great results, keep your drifts as simple as possible.
- 3) **To allow your drifts to move around the garden freely with less interference, make sure the drifts include plants that are both a suitable height and like to move slowly.** Plants love to move around and interact with each other, so we're going to try and let them live and create life the way they were meant to.

**Plants with a suitable height** will not block any desired views to or from your house if they decide to move. This equals less frustration for you and more freedom for your plants! As a side note, shorter gardens can provide you with a sense of openness and freedom (a nice feeling in an urban landscape).

**Plants that move slowly** tend to have an average life-span and are somewhat more predictable (not sure if you can call nature predictable). Your garden will be ever-changing with lots of surprises, but some predictability with your large plant drifts is nice. You will learn how your plant groups like to behave and interact with the surrounding life, which is very peaceful and rewarding in the long run.

### What to do with the other half of the garden space?

Create diversity! The more diverse the plant life, the more diverse the soil life and wildlife, and the more resilient your garden will be. So, please create diversity outside your drifts, either in your groundcover layer or scattered throughout the rest of your design. Tall plants (that don't spread) are fantastic for adding interest, and self-seeders are fantastic in small amounts to fill gaps. Just like in nature! In a prairie, self-seeders tend to scatter themselves around, filling in gaps between other plants that like to hang out in large groups.

You can incorporate a central plant theme at any time in the gardening process. If your prairie garden is already mature, try increasing the size of your drifts by adding more plants that fit the above descriptions. *See a list of suggested plants below.*

Thanks for reading, and join me in a journey to love your garden!

Aimee McDonald



## Plants for Creating Natural Drifts In the Garden

The following is a list of plants suitable for creating large drifts in your garden. When planted in locations suited to their preferences, they create fantastic displays, live for at least 4-5 years and tend to move or multiply slowly for more predictability in the garden.

### Wildflowers

Ascending Purple Milkvetch (*Astragalus striatus*)  
Canada Milkvetch (*Astragalus canadensis*)  
Culvers Root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*)  
Cut-leaved Anemone (*Anemone patens*)  
Dotted Blazingstar (*Liatrus punctate*)  
Joe Pyweed (*Eupatorium maculatum*)  
Meadow Blazingstar (*Liatrus ligulistylis*)  
Giant Hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*)  
Prairie Crocus (*Anemone patens*)  
Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea angustifolia*)  
Purple Prairie Clover (*Petalostemon purpureum*)  
Showy Goldenrod (*Solidago nemoralis*)  
Three Flowered Avens (*Geum triflorum*)  
White Prairie Clover (*Petalostemon candidum*)  
Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*)

### Grasses

Blue Grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*)  
Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)  
Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*)  
Switch Grass (*Panicum cirgatum*)