

Guide to Prairie Forbs & Grasses

The Prairie Learning Center is in the Capital Springs Recreation Area | Headquarters: Lussier Family Heritage Center, 3101 Lake Farm Road, Madison 53711



White Wild Indigo, *Baptisia alba*
Late May – early August, 3 – 6'
Tall, white spires of pea-like blooms spread upward along blue-green stems on this large, bushy plant. Brown pods develop by fall, and foliage becomes a tumbleweed by winter.



Butterfly Milkweed, *Asclepias tuberosa*
Mid June – August, 15 – 30"
A short stature and standout red-orange flowers make this a superb garden plant. Its color, alternately-positioned leaves (most), and lack of milky latex make it a unique a milkweed species.



Red Milkweed, *Asclepias incarnata*
Mid June – mid August, 1 - 4'
This tall, showy milkweed of moist soils has dark pink, vanilla-scented flowers, beloved by many pollinators. Its leaves are long and narrow. Red Milkweed is a host plant for the Monarch Butterfly, like all native milkweeds.



Wild Bergamot, *Monarda fistulosa*
Late June – early September, 18 – 46"
A pollinator magnate, Wild Bergamot produces many round clusters of small, lavender tube-shaped flowers. Leaves are opposite along the stem, toothed, gray-green in color and extremely fragrant.



Blue Vervain, *Verbena hastata*
Late June – September, 1 – 5'
Wreaths of bright violet flowers bloom upward through the growing season on narrow spikes, attracting many pollinators. This plant has square stems and prefers moister soils.



Pale Purple Coneflower, *Echinacea pallida*
Late June – August, 1 – 3'
Delicate pale pink petals droop around a reddish brown disk for an elegant floral display. Long lance-shaped, rough leaves and white pollen from tiny disk flowers help distinguish it from Purple Coneflower (*E. purpurea*). WI threatened species (S3 rank).



Virginia Mountain Mint, *Pycnanthemum virginianum*, early July – mid Sept, 1 – 3'
Many small white or lavender flowers with two-lipped petals cluster on top of this very handsome, almost bushy plant. Its small leaves are extremely fragrant when crushed.



Cup Plant, *Silphium perfoliatum*
July – September, 3 – 8'
This prairie classic dons yellow sunflower-like blooms and very large, distinctive leaves that grow fused around the stem. These *perfoliate* leaves can cup water for days, used by insects.



Smooth Oxeye, *Heliopsis helianthoides*
June – early October, 3 – 5'
Sunflower-like gold blooms around orange disks are showy throughout summer and into fall. Leaves are rough, triangle-shaped, and sit opposite along upright stems.



Smooth Penstemon, *Penstemon digitalis*
Mid June – mid July, 1 – 4'
Many elegant, white tubular flowers branch from erect stems. Opposite, triangle-shaped leaves pair around the stem. Bumble bees crawl deeply in and out of the flowers.



Rosinweed, *Silphium integrifolium*
Late June – early September, 2 – 6'
Lemon yellow petals surround a gold disk on this prairie plant. Rough, oval leaves of uniform size clasp in opposite pairs onto the stem. Its pollen, nectar, and seeds are important wildlife food.



Hoary Vervain, *Verbena stricta*
Late June – early October, 1 – 4'
Wreaths of lavender flowers bloom upward through the growing season on stiff, thick spikes, attracting many pollinators. Its leaves are covered in soft hairs. Unlike Blue Vervain (*V. hastata*), it prefers dry soils.



Boneset, *Eupatorium perfoliatum*
Late June – September, 1 – 3'
Small white, star-shaped flowers with a delicate scent cluster at the top of this prairie plant. Pairs of leaves look fused, as if growing around the stem (perfoliate).



Rattlesnake Master, *Eryngium yuccifolium*
Early July – late August, 1 – 3'
This forb is like no other! Long, thick leathery leaves with spiny margins are paired with pedestaled spikey white flower-globes. The common name derives from an old tale that the its roots could heal a rattlesnake bite.



Yellow Coneflower, *Ratibida pinnata*
July – early October, 2 – 4'
Yellow Coneflower has distinctive drooping yellow petals around a protruding central brown disk. Leaves are low on the plant and deeply-lobed, reminiscent of the shape of a feather.



Indiangrass, *Sorghastrum nutans*,
July – mid October, 3 – 7'
Soft gold-brown flower panicles with bright yellow stamens grow on tall upright stems. Indiangrass sways in waves over the prairie with a summer breeze, growing in loose tufts.

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Big Bluestem, *Andropogon gerardii*
July – late August, 3 – 8'
This quintessential member of the tallgrass prairie is green-blue in summer and red-bronze after frost. Big Bluestem is very tall, grows in clumps, and can be identified by stem color as well as turkey foot-shaped spikes that hold its flowers.



Lavender Hyssop, *Agastache foeniculum*
July – October, 2 – 4'
A bumble bee magnate, lavender flowers bloom on spikes through summer into fall. Stems are square, like all plants in the mint family, and hairy leaves are scented like anise when crushed.



Little Bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*
Mid July – mid October, 2 – 3'
Handsome grass tufts are green-blue in spring, ruby red in summer, and bronze-orange after first frost as spikes turn silver and fuzzy (see photo). Little Bluestem is ideal home gardens due to its compact shape and small stature.



Sawtooth Sunflower, *Helianthus grosseserratus*, late July – October, 3 – 9'
Numerous yellow sunflowers bloom atop this very tall prairie plant. Long, toothed leaves are rough to the touch and tend to arch up and out along hairless, sometimes purple stems. This sunflower is a pollinator magnet.



Stiff Goldenrod, *Solidago rigida*
Early August – late September, 1 – 4'
Small, flat-topped gold flowers cluster at the top of this goldenrod. Short, stiff (hence its common name) egg-shaped thick upper leaves cling to the stem, while lower leaves can grow 8" long.



Prairie Dropseed, *Sporobolus heterolepis*
August – early September, 12 – 28"
Prairie Dropseed is a fragrant grass shaped in neat circular clumps with dense tufts of long, hair-like blades that arch up and out from the center of the plant. The soft tuft is green in summer, turning gold in fall. Its attractive form makes a nice border in a prairie garden.



Purple Coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*
Mid August – mid September, 2 – 4'
Striking magenta petals and brown-orange disks display on stout stems. Egg-shaped leaves with rounded bases and yellow pollen on its tiny disk flowers help distinguish it from Pale Purple Coneflower (*E. pallida*).



Compass Plant, *Silphium laciniatum*
July – August, 3 – 7'
Large sunflower-like flowers bloom on very tall stalks, producing fall seed devoured by birds. Deeply-lobed, long lower leaves are aligned almost vertically to the north-south (hence its common name), providing sun protection to leaf surfaces.



Ironweed, *Vernonia fasciculata*
Mid July – September, 3 – 6'
Ironweed's bright purple flower clusters are eye-catching on this tall plant of wet prairies and marshes. Its smooth, long leaves are edged with finely pointed teeth, and stems are frequently reddish-purple.



Showy Goldenrod, *Solidago speciosa*
Late July – early October, 1 – 4'
Densely-packed, gold flowers display on stiff, long cones. Bumble bees and Monarchs gather in mass on its late-blooming flowers. Look for narrow leaves at the top half on reddish stems. Living up to its name, this goldenrod is a stunning addition to any perennial garden.



Smooth Blue Aster, *Symphotrichum laeve*
Late July – early October, 1 – 4'
Lavender to pale blue petals surround yellow disks that redden with age. This attractive aster is easily identified by its smooth, almost waxy leaves that clasp to the stem in the middle and upper parts of the plant.



Brown-eyed Susan, *Rudbeckia triloba*
August – mid October, 1 – 5'
Gold egg-shaped petals surround a brown-purple disk on this widely and many-stemmed plant. Flowers are smaller than other "susan" species, reminiscent of small buttons. Three-lobed leaves are present on its lower stems.



Jerusalem Artichoke, *Helianthus tuberosus*
August – October, 3 – 10'
A sunflower with large bright yellow flowers and large leaves (up to 10" long and 5" wide), it produces edible tubers in fall. This plant is important for pollinators and birds, spreading readily via rhizomes (underground stems). It frequently hybridizes with other sunflowers.



New England Aster, *Symphotrichum novae-angliae*, late August – early October, 1 – 5'
A fall beauty, this tall aster displays bouquets of purple and rose. Leaves distinctly clasp around stems with tiny ear-shaped lobes. It is an important nectar source for pollinators and seed source for migratory birds.