Maintenance Guide for Pocket Prairies

To maintain a healthy diversity of plants and grasses on your pocket prairie, a regimen of maintenance will be necessary. Below are suggestions of when and what to do to keep your prairie looking good, remaining useful, and soul-soothing. Also, it is most important for your prairie’s social and political survival to involve as many student and parent volunteers as possible in the maintenance tasks.

Seed Collecting
Seed collecting is one of the most pleasant and rewarding maintenance tasks on the prairie and will be mentioned often. There are plenty of all levels of math and science opportunities in this easy and clean maintenance task: counting, observing, identifying, predicting, estimating, sorting, classifying, measuring mass, etc.

Be sure to collect seeds in dry paper bags (like brown lunch sacks), a separate bag for each different kind of seed. Label the bags with the name of the seeds and the date you collected the seeds. After collecting, spread the seeds/seed heads out on paper plates to dry thoroughly in your air-conditioned room. (If you collected whole seed heads, you can separate the seeds and discard the chaff.) Package the dried seeds in labeled envelopes (name and date) and store in a cool dry place. These seeds can then be planted back into your pocket prairie in the Fall/Spring, made into seed balls, or shared with other schools, people, etc.

For flowering plants, watch for when the stem right below the flower head is brown (at which time the seeds will be ripe), then you can just snip off the whole seed head letting it fall into your paper bag. Depending on your needs, and size of your pocket prairie, you can practice the seed collecting method of “take some (20%) and leave some”. Often you might find that many seeds have already fallen before you get to them, which is fine.

For grasses, watch for when the seeds are no longer green. Run your cupped hand and fingers along the seeds, if they fall off readily into your hand they are ripe and ready to be collected.

Photography
Taking photographs many not seem like maintenance, or a task, but it is a good idea to photo-document your prairie’s grow and seasonal changes. Include photos of your students working in the prairie as well.

Prairie “Haircut”
Unless you are having a “controlled burn” or cattle are munching down your prairie, you will need to give your prairie a “haircut” in the very late Fall or very early winter. Your pocket prairie needs to be trimmed and have the trimmed debris removed. This “land-clearing or hair-cutting” activity promotes new growth and makes space for the wildflowers in the Spring. Following are suggestions:
• Cut all flowering plant seed-sticks at the ground level. You can leave the rattlesnake master and coneflower leaves, just removing the brown ones (your choice).
• Cut bunch grasses to a height of 6-8 inches about the ground. If your bluestems haven’t bloomed by “haircut time” you may want to leave them until they bloom.
• Cut any Bermuda grass, or carpet grass to the ground.
• Depending on the weather, new prairie growth begins in January and you shouldn’t be stomping all over your prairie once new Spring flowers are growing, so get your prairie trimmed before the December holidays if possible.
• Cutting tools could include hedge shears, hand clippers, and weed- wackers.
August
- Students are back from vacation and are excited to see what’s in bloom on the prairie. Perhaps a “welcome back/what’s blooming” bulletin board could get students eager to visit the prairie.
- Collect seeds. Texas coneflowers should be ready to collect. Look for any other flower seed heads, like Indian blankets and coreopsis.
- Pull out ragweed that grew over the summer; it blooms in late summer and early Fall so get rid of as much of it as you can. (It is easy for student to recognize and easy to pull up if they pull one at a time.)
- Take photos of the blooming liatris (long purple flower heads), and the butterflies on them.
- Lots of good photo opportunities are available with all the yellow flowers still blooming.

September
- Purchase bluebonnet seeds, they are sold locally at places like SW Fertilizer, but they go fast. You can also order them from Native American Seed Company or Wildseed Farms.
- Look for seeds that are ripe for collecting such as: blazing star liatris, rattlesnake master, switchgrass, and more coneflowers.
- Set up a “grow-out station” to plant your own prairie’s seeds. (Be sure to have water on a timer if your station is outdoors.)

October
- Add new plants (grasses and forbs) to your prairie to increase diversity and fill in bare spaces. Check the plants’ sources and origins, only buy local native plants. (Contact Audubon’s Natives Nursery for the best selection and prices)
- Keep new plants watered adequately.
- Look for grass seeds to collect such as Yellow Indiangrass, Little Bluestem, Big Bluestem, Gulf Muhly grass. Look for sunflower seeds also.
- Remember to get photos of your grasses with their beautiful ripe seed heads.

November
- Plant bluebonnet seeds (great activity for kindergarteners) and other wildflower seeds in the early part of the month.
- Plant some seeds in your “grow-out station as well.
- Plan the date(s) for your Prairie “haircut” and line up your volunteers. Choose a time that maximizes student involvement. Have a plan for the debris removal and purchase lots of big trash bags. If you have people that will want some of the cut grass (for rabbits, horses, etc) , make arrangements for them to pick up (or help) on “haircut” day.

December
- Have your prairie “haircut” day(s). (You may want to not trim your new plants planted in October.)
- Remove any tree seedlings growing in your prairie.

January
- Plan with teachers how they can utilize the prairie in their Spring semester classes.
- Plan some special prairie events or tie a spring school event to the prairie.
- Collect bluestem seeds, if remaining.
- Cut down any remaining grasses or dead flowers.

February
- Watch for spring wildflowers. Document them! Advertise them!
• Take your kindergarteners to see the bluebonnet seedlings.
• Take photos of first arrivals.
• Divide and transplant grasses to fill open spaces, if necessary. Watch transplants, keep them watered, even if dormant looking. They will show new growth after a couple of weeks.
• Talk about prairies and cowboys during the Houston Rodeo time (mid to late February).

March
• Purchase some native prairie plants to add to your prairie such as extra bluebonnets, wine-cups, lanceleaf coreopsis, etc. Check the plants’ sources and origins, only buy local native plants. (Contact Audubon’s Natives Nursery for the best selection and prices)
• This is also a good month to divide and transplant grasses, (see February).
• Plant some seeds and seedlings in your grow-out station as well.

April
• Take lots of photos for the school’s website. Promote your prairie.
• Enjoy the wildflowers!
• Collect bluebonnet seeds.
• Pull out ragweed and remove before it blooms; it is easy for students to recognize and pull up if they pull one at a time.
• Look for deep-rooted sedge, Vaseygrass, and Brazilian vervain; dig them out completely, and discard. (Do not compost these nonnative, highly invasive plants.)
• Look for early ripening seeds to collect such as Early barley and lanceleaf coreopsis.

MAY
Since you may not be at your school campus much (or at all) during June and July, try to do as many maintenance tasks as possible in May.
• Check wildflowers for “dead heads” to collect seeds.
• Trim all gamagrass to about 12 inches high, removing the seed heads and discarding. It is an aggressive grower, and will take over your prairie if you let it.
• Pull out ragweed and remove it before it blooms; it is easy for students to recognize and if you pull one at a time, easy to pull up.
• Look for deep-rooted sedge, Vaseygrass, and Brazilian vervain; dig them out completely, and discard.
• Look for seeds to collect such as: knot-root bristle grass, milkweed, American basket flower.

June
• Take photos of the lovely blooming hot weather wildflowers.
• Water, if the weather has been dry for too long, particularly areas with new plants or transplants.
• Collect seeds like knot-root bristle grass, Virginia wildrye, American basket flower, coreopsis, browseed paspalum, etc

July
• Take photos of the lovely blooming hot weather wildflowers.
• Water, if the weather has been dry for too long, particularly areas with new plants or transplants.
• Check for and remove invasives that might be creeping into your prairie (see May).