



Sustainable Schoolyards

Managing a Native Garden

NEBRASKA STATEWIDE ARBORETUM

NATIVE GARDEN

- A native garden is managed to keep the intended character while allowing the plant community to be dynamic.
- Tasks such as watering and weeding are done deliberately, as needed.
- A native garden will outgrow the need for mulching, watering and weeding.

VS

TRADITIONAL GARDEN

- A traditional garden is maintained to preserve a specific look.
- Maintenance can become a ritual done by schedule rather than by need.
- A traditional garden requires the same amount of mulching, weeding and watering every year.

Signs of Care:

A **clean edge** provides a visual frame for the garden, defining its place in the larger landscape and subconsciously increasing peoples appreciation for it.



A clean edge can be created many ways including mowing or trimming as demonstrated by the prairie strip at Union Plaza in Lincoln.

A Dynamic Garden

A native garden is designed to reflect the plant communities found in prairies and meadows. These natural landscapes are made up of plants that move around and take turns in the spotlight. We imitate this by seeding in placeholder plants that will provide an immediate visual appeal to the garden but after a couple years will fade and give way to other plants that have matured. By leaving mulch out of the garden and allowing seedheads to remain for the winter, plants have the chance to reseed themselves and renew the garden each year. Keep in mind that this is a dynamic plant community and the dominant species may change from year to year however, as the garden matures there may be a need for enhancement planting.

Garden Activity Timeline

Establishment: a new garden will need the most attention in its first year.

- Straw mulch helps hold in moisture, prevent erosion and control weeds without overwhelming small plants and seedlings.
- Seeding placeholder plants in between helps control weeds while giving the garden a finished look early on.
- Young plants will need watering until they establish.
- Remove aggressive and invasive species before they become a problem.



A light layer of straw mulch is ideal for helping native plants get established.



Violets seeded in between new sedges to provide groundcover while they mature.

Spring Cleaning: wait for spring to clean up the garden, plants provide benefits all winter long.

- Dormant plants provide important winter habitat and food for many insects, birds and other wildlife.
- Grasses, stems and seed heads also provide texture and color in the winter.
- Grasses and old foliage are important groundcover during the winter to prevent erosion from winter rains and snow melt. Begin cleaning debris from the garden mid-spring, as the first signs of green are showing.



Many sedges are semi-evergreen providing a bit of color as well as groundcover in the winter garden.

Summer Care: frequent, short visits to the garden keep management simple.

- Visit the garden once a week to catch weeds early on when they are easy to pull.
- Frequent visits means management is preventative and work can be short and sweet.
- Keep an eye on the weather and water during times of excessive heat or periods without rain.

Fall Inspection: make the most of your garden by saving cleanup for spring.

- Give the garden one final check for aggressive weeds but leave debris removal for spring to provide habitat and winter interest.
- Observe the dynamic nature of your garden, noting how the plants have moved around and worked together. Also make note of any enhancement planting that needs to be done in the spring.

Enhancement Planting: as your garden matures it may be necessary to add plants.

- To reestablish diversity.
- To adapt to changing conditions of available sun and moisture.
- Changing needs or uses for the garden.



Frost coats grasses to create stunning winter scenes.