MEMORANDUM
VILLAGE OF NORTHBROOK
DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING SERVICES DEPARTMENT

TO: ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COMMISSION

FROM: TESSA MURRAY, GREENEST REGION CORPS MEMBER

DATE: FEBRUARY 2021

SUBJECT: WINTER GARDEN PREPARATION

INTRODUCTION

As Northbrook continues to receive large snowstorms and frigid temperatures for at least another month, it may feel like there is no end in sight for plant and animal lovers craving the views, sounds, and smells of new life and growth that comes with warmer weather. Thankfully, for native gardeners, the plants indigenous to the Chicago region are well adapted to these conditions. Snow acts as a blanket, insulating roots from the freezing air temperatures, wind, and precipitation. For native plants gone to seed, the dormant seeds rely on cycles of freezing and thawing to loosen seed coats and prepare seeds to germinate. Seedlings may first be spotted on sunny days, but still freezing during the nights.

While we await warmer weather, the Village encourages residents to begin planning their outdoor spaces with sustainable best practices in mind. Gardeners can choose plants to maximize functionality with edible plants or those that maximize drainage capacity during flood events, for example. Growing native perennials with alternating bloom times will fill your garden with visits from wildlife stretching from early spring to late fall.

PREPARATION GUIDE

A dedicated plan may work to ensure success. The following is a suggested list of steps:

1) Pay attention and observe how precipitation and sun hit your outdoor space. Then, map out differences in regards to the soil, sun, and slope of the area. Sloped land can result in runoff from rainwater washing the garden down the slope, to prevent this one can edge or construct a barrier for the garden or plant deep rooted plants tolerant to slopes. It is also equally important to know which plants require full sun versus partial sun, with southern exposure providing the most sun throughout the day.

2) Note where different heights of plants will fit best, with taller grasses and wildflowers further back from groundcovers that tolerate foot traffic.

3) Research the proper plants for these spaces and conditions. If unsure that the plant is native to our region, a quick tip is to search on Google images the name of the plant plus "USDA range". A map highlighting the plant's native habitat should appear as a top search result.

4) Research plants carefully to learn their root and aboveground growth habits, and how they propagate (see Figure 1). There are some pairs of native plants that tend to work beautifully in tandem, like Aster and Goldenrod, Blackeyed Susan and Wild Bergamot, or Common Milkweed and Rattlesnake Master.

5) Plan ahead to attend upcoming native plant sales, or order online when plants can be shipped (in above-freezing temperatures.) Spending on native plants is a worthwhile investment as these go to seed and can be spread to other areas in your yard, and shared with family, friends, and neighbors.

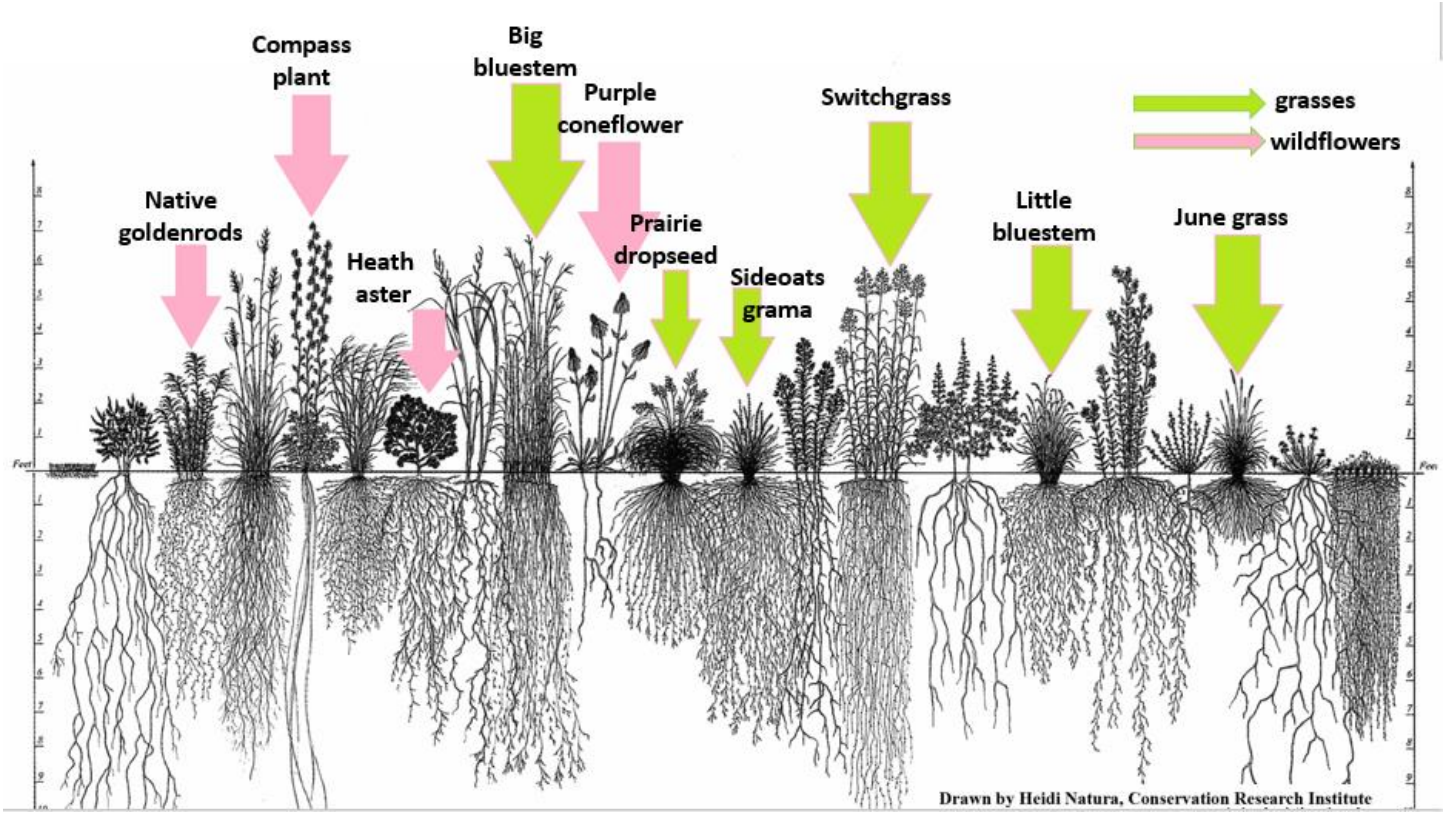

Figure 1

Native Plant Identification Guide

We are privileged to live in a biodiverse ecosystem with colorful native prairie and wetland plants that do not require sacrificing function for aesthetic beauty. Please use the following guide for examples of native plant species and their preferences to aid in your garden preparation.

In areas prone to flooding it is suggested to utilize our region's wetland plants. Grasses and sedges are best known to absorb water in their roots: see Big bluestem and Switchgrass (Figure 1), or Prairie cord grass, and Virginia wild rye. Native wetland wildflowers include Blue flag iris and Wild columbine (listed in the guide), as well as Heath aster and Marsh marigold. Flood-tolerant bushes native to our region include Highbush blueberry and Bog birch. Native groundcovers that survive seasonal flooding include Canada anemone and Wild ginger.

COMMON MILKWEED
3-5 ft; July-August; Part shade- full sun; Food for: Bees, butterflies, moths, flies

NEW ENGLAND ASTER
3-6 ft; August-October; Part shade-full sun; Food for: Bees, butterflies, flies, moths

SOLOMON'S SEAL
6 in-2 ft; May-June; Full shade-part shade; Food for: Hummingbirds, bees

GIANT GOLDENROD
3-4 ft; August-October; Part shade- full sun; Food for: Bees, butterflies, moths, flies

BLACK-EYED SUSAN
2-3 ft; June-September; Part shade-full sun; Food for: Dragonflies, bees, butterflies, moths

WILD COLUMBINE
2-3 ft; May-July; Part shade-part sun; Food for: Hummingbirds, bees

PURPLE CONEFLOWER
3-4 ft; June-October; Part shade-full sun; Food for: Hummingbirds, bees, butterflies, flies

BLUE FLAG IRIS
2-3 ft; May-July; Part shade-full sun; Food for: Butterflies, skippers

BLOODROT
6 in-1 ft; April-May; Part shade-part sun; Food for: Bees, ants

WILD BERGAMOT
2-4 ft; June-August; Part shade-full sun; Food for: Hummingbirds, bees, butterflies, moths

FOXGLOVE BEARD TONGUE
3-5 ft; June-July; Part shade-full sun; Food for: Bees

BLUE VIOLET
3-8 in; April-June; Part shade-part sun; Food for: Bees, skippers, flies

STARTING YOUR GARDEN: WHAT TO EXPECT

Adapted to the Midwest region's extreme fluctuations in weather, native plants are robust. However, first establishing them requires attention and care. They should be watered and composted often for the first year they grow in new soil, then do well with little help after that. Once established, they may benefit from trimming once a year in the spring. A properly planted native garden should be spaced much closer together compared to traditional gardens, leaving little room between each plant and therefore avoiding invading species' competition for space.

If you have planted in consideration of their natural preferences, native plants shouldn't need chemical spraying, fertilizing, annual mulching, heavy weeding or watering. Winter serves as an opportunity for gardeners to plan ahead to avoid excessive maintenance.