

# PLANNING FOR PLANTING: SEEDING NATIVE SPECIES



Prairie grass species, such as green needle grass and northern wheatgrass, are hardy, nutrient dense and drought tolerant.  
Photo credit: Tara Mulhern Davidson



Species such as purple prairie clover, a native legume, are well suited to Saskatchewan climates.  
Photo credit: Tara Mulhern Davidson



Winterfat is a native prairie species that is often sought after by grazing animals because it is high in protein. Photo credit: Larry Gabruch

submitted by South of the Divide Conservation Action Program Inc.

As mild winter weather transitions into a warm spring, producers are gearing up for an early seeding season, including those who are planning to seed forages. For farmers and ranchers who are used to looking on the horizon for the next raincloud, seeded native grass species may be the ticket to long-term sustainability. Producers who are considering seeding perennial forages should investigate whether native species are a good option for their operations.

The South of the Divide Conservation Action Program Inc. (SODCAP Inc.) is a species at risk conservation organization focused on working with producers in the Milk River watershed, also known as the South of the Divide. The group is currently offering programming to assist area producers who are interested in converting cultivated land to native prairie species.

"Producers will benefit from forage stand longevity when they choose to seed natives," says Larry Gabruch, a native restoration agrologist working with SODCAP Inc. "Well-managed seeded natives hold their productivity over the long term," Gabruch explains, adding that while tame stands may require rejuvenation or inputs, native species likely will not. For ranchers or farmers interested in a long-term low-maintenance method of increasing their grazing resources, native plants are a great option.

Because they are native to the region, prairie species such as needle-and-thread, northern wheatgrass, purple prairie clover, green needle grass, blue grama, and June grass are most adaptable to local climates. "Native species are able to withstand weather extremes, particularly drought," says Gabruch, adding that a well-planned native seeding project will adapt to changing weather conditions and patterns.

Gabruch acknowledges that there are some misconceptions about natives, including the notion that native stands are far less productive than tame stands. "A lot of producers rely on tame grass in the southwest, and they work in many circumstances. However, a well-designed native planting including native legumes can rival performance compared to seeded tame forages. Over the long term, natives will withstand drought conditions and maintain longevity better than tame species, which is where the main differences and advantage comes in," Gabruch explains.

The benefits of seeded native species don't stop at producers. An established diverse mix will contribute to the overall biodiversity in an area. This diversity helps to provide quality habitat for species at risk as well as a source of food and an area for species to forage in. Species at risk, such as the burrowing owl, Sprague's pipit and chestnut collared longspur, all require prairie grassland habitat to complete their life cycles. Native plantings can help connect fragments of habitat, fill in holes, and benefit the overall ecosystem, in addition to increasing grazing capacity on a farm or ranch.

When it comes to seeding native species, planning is key. Gabruch advises producers to implement a strong pre-seeding weed control plan and to plant shortly after a pre-seeding herbicide application to give the native seedlings a competitive advantage over weeds. Timing is critical, suggests Gabruch, who says preventative weed control will save time and effort in the future. "Use high quality, weed-free seed that is well-suited to the area it will be planted in," he adds, saying that a seed analysis showing purity and germination will help determine the proper seeding rate.

For more information on SODCAP Inc.'s seeded native program, which includes financial incentives and technical advice, contact agrologist Larry Gabruch at 306-716-9603. 🐦