

Native Seed Gardeners — Challenges to Restoring Vital Plant Species

by Katherine Grover

Restoring beautiful vanishing native plant species to our landscapes is challenging work, but it increases diversity and improves the health of natural habitats for the benefit of all living things.

When partners Audubon Chicago Region, Citizens for Conservation, Friends of Spring Creek Forest Preserve and the Spring Creek Stewards created Native Seed Gardeners (NSG) in 2008, the goal was to produce more seed of dwindling yet crucial species. We sought volunteer gardeners to take our free NSG native seedlings and asked in return that they plant them in their home gardens, nurture them and return the seeds year-after-year to the NSG program. That seed would be returned to the land we are restoring in the Barrington area and neighboring communities.

Since 2009, the year we first gave plants to gardeners, it has been a formidable challenge to have seed returned from the plants we gave to hundreds of NSG members. Being gardeners ourselves, we understand the obstacles they face bringing the seedlings to maturity and producing the vital seeds. Here are guidelines we suggest using to overcome these obstacles:

- Determine the amount of space, sunlight and moisture in your garden.
- Visit NativeSeedGardeners.org to determine whether your garden is prairie, savanna or woods.
- Review the plants within each environment to determine those suitable for your site, and make a wish list of plants to grow. Learn about them.
- The species being offered in the new season will be listed on the NSG website in late spring. Compare them to your wish list. An email to members will give information about species and confirm the dates and times for plant pick-up.
- Plant same species seedlings near each other to improve pollination, and mark their locations with stakes for future reference.
- Remove weeds which will compete for space, sunlight, moisture and nutrients.

- Fertilize as needed in the first year. Once a plant is established, it needs no fertilizer.
- Water when the plant appears stressed from lack of moisture; otherwise, it will not produce seed. No seed means no future plants!
- Protect plants from predators that might browse on them. Animal repellents can minimize damage, and fences can keep predators out. **Avoid netting which can trap beneficial animals like birds and butterflies.**
- Look for seeds after the flower blooms and dries. The website describes individual seeds or pods.
- Check seeds for ripeness; weather influences timing. Collect seeds before the wind, rain or animals disperse them.
- Collect and dry the ripe seeds to prevent mold which will negatively affect their viability.
- Return the seeds to NSG per instructions on the NSG website.

Do you have the diligence to plant, grow, and return so that we can help restore the species to preserves? The links between each seed, plant, garden, open land and community benefit all living things, including you!

We hope you will visit us at NativeSeedGardeners.org and Facebook to learn more about NSG and see the species. We are indebted to our volunteer gardeners who continue to plant natives for the diversity, health, and beauty of our communities. We are mindful of Margaret Mead's observation, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."



Propagation beds at CFC headquarters. Photo by Donna Bolzman.