

Trailside Wildflower Guide 5
The Late-summer Flora

Mid and Late August

Introducing some of the prairie and savanna species at Somme Prairie Grove.

Take a hike with this trail guide and see if you find this a happy way to learn the **wildflowers and grasses** that you'll find at points marked on the map. You may see these same species at many places in this diverse preserve, but they should be especially easy to find at the numbered stations. Keep track of where you are by watching for features on the map such as groves of trees, trail intersections, and wet areas (with log bridges). It may be easier and more rewarding if you bring along a plant identification book (such as those listed at the end of this guide).

1. On this first stretch of trail beyond the buckthorn, you should be able to find chest-high **sweet black-eyed Susan** (yellow flowers, brown centers, lower leaves divided into three parts) and **stiff goldenrod** (a prairie species with flat-topped clusters of small yellow flowers and wide oval leaves). The principal grass along the trail here is chest-high to head-high **big bluestem**. It is recognizable by its often brightly colored stems (blue, pink, orange, green and many other colors) and by its distinctive seed heads which gave the plant its other common name, "turkey foot." Hidden down in the grass is the **nodding wild onion**. Notice that each flower stem has a little crook, just before the spherical head of six-petaled, pink flowers.

2. As the footpath starts to rise, notice clumps of knee-high **prairie dropseed** grass – with its dense, fine, spreading leaves. The flower heads are fragrant, some way with the scent of buttered popcorn.

3. Just before the trail turns toward the woods, see if you can find an area six feet across (mostly at the right side of the trail) that looks a

little different. It is a former burn scar from a burned brush pile that includes a patch of **satin grass** – a dense clump of fine drooping leaves and thin drooping seed heads. The vegetation in this area changes every year as the burn scar gradually recovers. Nearby, in former brush areas find such weedy species as **tall goldenrod** (pointed plumes of yellow flowers, stems rough), **queen Anne's lace** (flat-topped clusters of white flowers, finely divided leaves), **tall boneset** (paired, slender leaves with flat-topped clusters of white flowers).

4. Just before you enter the woods, notice the head-high clusters of deep purple flowers, **iron weed**.

5. This woods is recently cleared of brush and is less rich than Vestal Grove, the woods you'll walk through at the end of this loop trail. The sprawling, pale native grass that covers much of the ground here is **white grass**; notice by running it through your fingers the circles of raspy bristles here and there on the stems. Watch for an ankle-high, fragrant mint called **American pennyroyal**. Look for paired leaves, with tufts of bluish flowers and smaller leaves where the main leaves join the stem. This annual species comes and goes with disturbance. It especially likes somewhat bear areas near tree trunks of where a bit of wood recently burned. Toward the end of the woods, notice more nodding onion to the left of the trail. This plant is common in both prairie and open woods. The erect grass with large plumed heads (waist to head high) is **wood reed**.

6. As you descend the slope, watch on the right for a ten-foot long patch of a waist high grass with flat stems and many branches. This is **little bluestem**.

7. The shin-high creamy white tubular flowers in clusters atop a stem of paired, simple leaves is **Cream gentian**. In the past, over-abundant deer ate every one of these (and many other) flowers. But thanks to culling by both the Forest Preserve District and the Village of Northbrook, deer numbers are now more balanced, and you should find plenty of flowers of the gentians, gerardias, lilies and other favorite deer foods.

8. In this area, the big blue stem is well mixed with another tall grass with wider, bluer leaves and plumed flower heads. This is **Indian grass**.

9. Where the trail crosses an intermittent stream or swale (crossed by a “cauderoy bridge” of parallel log sections), look for **water parsnip** (white, flat-topped flower clusters), **sneezeweed** (yellow petals and round yellow middles), and **cord grass** (tall, erect rasping leaves – the tallest prairie grass).

10. On the little hill, notice the knee-high spikes of purple flower clusters – **rough blazing star**. The rich vegetation here includes lots of little bluestem and dropseed grasses.

11. In the semi-shade of a small grove of bur oaks, you can find both **sweet black-eyed** and **brown-eyed Susan**. Both have three-pointed lower leaves and brown “eyes.” Brown-eyed Susan has shorter petals. Later in the grove notice a clone of **woodland sunflower** (erect, single stems with a few paired leaves) on both sides of the trail. This is all one plant, connected underground by roots.

12. As the trail turns west to begin its loop back, there are three tall species of sunflower relatives that are typical of disturbed ground. **Saw-tooth sunflower** has yellow “petals” and narrow leaves alternately on a smooth stalk. **Tall coreopsis** has eight-petaled yellow flowers and three part leaves in pairs. **Tall boneset** (again) has flat-topped white flower clusters.

13. After you pass through a dense buckthorn thicket, notice the rich mix of grasses in the little sunny opening. This might be a place to review little bluestem, big bluestem, Indian grass, and Kalm’s brome. The grass with large heads of seeds with long bristles (awns) on each is **Canada wild rye**.

14. In the semi-shade of a basswood tree, and just before another cauderoy bridge, notice a clone of goldenrod with pointed plumed flowerheads (like tall goldenrod without its rough stems). This

species has smooth (sometimes bluish) stems. It’s called **giant goldenrod**. These two tall species can be most easily told apart by feeling the stems.

15. Just before another “bridge,” watch for the fancy pink flowers of **biennial gaura**. Each flower has four petals (mostly point up), eight stamens, and one cross-shaped “stigma” – the female part of the flower.

16. Along the “bridge” itself, notice the candelabra spikes of **blue vervain** and the flat-topped clusters of white flowers of **cowbane**. The small flowers of the vervain, as they open a few at a time, gradually move up the inflorescence like a napkin ring.

17. On the right side of the trail here (about six feet north of the trail), look for fen betony or **marsh betony** – creamy yellow flowers on shin-high stalks rising from fern-like leaves. As the trail rises from the swale, watch on the left for many shin-high delicate goldenrods with pointed plumes that turn back down at the tip like little elf caps. Also note the finely hairy gray stems. This is **gray goldenrod**.

18. In this next stretch is a fine display of **round-headed bush clover**. Notice the large heads of flower buds and seed capsules, often with few or no flowers open (unless the rain has been great recently). When these shy pea flowers are willing to open, they are delicate, creamy-white with pink markings.

19. The plant with five-petaled white flowers is **flowering spurge**. The branches of its inflorescence rise out of a whorl of leaves, but the rest of the leaves alternate on the stem.

20. In the middle of a circle of **scarlet oaks**, find a beautiful five-lobed, tubular yellow flower which is semi-parasitic on the oak roots. This is **yellow gerardia**. The clumps seem to move around from year to year.

21. Here's another recently cleared area that's filled with "weeds" (native or alien plants that heal the wound of the disturbance and which give way in a few years to more "conservative" species. The elegant grass with so finely divided a flower head that it looks like a mist from a little way off is **fall witchgrass**. The nodding cylindric flower and seed heads belong to **foxtail grass**. Tall purple stems with paired leaves and flat-topped white flower clusters are **late boneset**. The leafy tall plant with petalless green flowers (that later turn to "cotton") is **burnweed**.

22. In this rich area, notice the five blue petals of **tall bellflower**. Notice the pale pinky powder-puff blue flower heads of **tall thistle**. The leaves of this uncommon woodland plant are pale underneath. A square stem, paired leaves, and a cylindric flower head with just a few yellow flowers open at any one time identify **yellow giant hyssop**.

23. As you enter the dappled shade of the large oaks of Vestal Grove, notice the light blue flowers of the **big-leaf aster**. Notice non-flowering areas of the big leavess of this species covering the ground in some areas. The elegant branching goldenrod here is **elm-leaved goldenrod**. Paired, wide leaves and flat-topped clusters of white flowers identify **white snakeroot**. Whirls of leaves on an erect stem topped by domes of gray-purple flowers belong to **purple Joe Pye weed**. In areas of low deer density, this plant is often six to eight feet tall, but most of the plants here are eaten down a bit.

24. Where a swale opens the woods a bit, notice **false dragonhead** or **obedient plant** – with its pink tubular flower heads. If you push the flowers from one side to another, they stay in place, obediently. **Spotted Joe Pye weed** has flat-topped pink flower heads and whorled leaves on a purple (sometimes spotted) stem. **Riverbank wild rye** has hanging seed heads with straight bristles (awns). In **Virginia rye**, the seed heads have shorter awns and are erect.

25. On the left side of the trail, watch for the a clambering vine with three-part leaves and clusters of pale blue-pink flowers. This is **hog peanut**.

Thank you for enjoying the flora of Somme Prairie Grove. We'd be so pleased to hear any comments on this trailside wildflower guide or on the preserve generally.

Good field guides:

Wildflowers – Northeastern/North-central North America by Roger Tory Peterson and Margaret McKenny. Excellent drawings and descriptions. Organized by color.

Newcomb's Wildflower Guide by Lawrence Newcomb. A key guides you quickly to the right group of plants.

Tallgrass Prairie Wildflowers by Douglas Ladd. Excellent photographs of the prairie species and many of the savanna species. Excellent summary of prairie ecology.

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