History of Buffalo Trace Prairie

Bison herds followed well-worn trails, called traces, as they migrated through the prairie. These traces were also used by humans to travel, and some later became permanent roads. Interstate 74 follows approximately the same path as an old bison migration route.

This land was purchased by the Champaign County Forest Preserve District in 1976. The reconstructed prairie that is now here provides important habitat for the unique plants and animals of the tallgrass prairie. It is also part of our Illinois natural heritage.

When the first settlers arrived in Illinois, more than 60% of Illinois, over 22 million acres, was prairie! Currently, less than 0.01% (just over 2,000 acres) of original prairie remains.

The prairie must be actively managed through invasive species removal and prescribed fire to remain viable. The tallgrass prairie ecosystem is adapted to, and depends on, fire, to remain healthy. You may see evidence of prescribed fire in late fall and winter.

Compass Plant
Flowers: Yellow
Blooms: Late spring-summer
The flowers bloom on sturdy stems 6-12 feet tall! The leaves are rough and heavily lobed. This plant is named for its ability to orient its leaves along a north-south axis to avoid the hot midday sun.

Cream Gentian
Flowers: Whitish
Blooms: Late summer
At only 1-2 feet tall, this plant is a relatively short prairie plant. Bumblebees are the main pollinators of the flowers.

Common Milkweed
Flowers: Pink
Blooms: Late spring-summer
At only 1-2 feet tall, this plant is a relatively short prairie plant. Bumblebees are the main pollinators of the flowers.

Foxglove Beard Tongue
Flowers: White
Blooms: Late spring-midsummer
This plant grows up to 3 feet tall, and is part of the Snapdragon family. The flowers are 1 inch long.

Goldenrod
Flowers: Yellow
Blooms: Summer-fall
There are over 10 species of goldenrods in Illinois. Because many bloom at the same time as ragweed, they are often incorrectly blamed for hay fever.

Cup Plant
Flowers: Yellow
Blooms: Summer-fall
Cup plants can grow 4-10 feet tall. Birds often drink water from the 'cups' formed by the leaves where they wrap around the stem. The stems of this plant are square!

Prairie Dock
Flowers: Yellow
Blooms: Summer-fall
This plant's slender flowering stalks can grow up to 10 feet tall, helping it reach over other tall prairie plants. The large broad leaves feel like sandpaper.

Goldenrod
Flowers: Yellow
Blooms: Summer-fall
There are over 10 species of goldenrods in Illinois. Because many bloom at the same time as ragweed, they are often incorrectly blamed for hay fever.
Welcome!

East-central Illinois was once home to a vast tallgrass prairie ecosystem. The deep roots of prairie plants (up to 15 feet deep!) built the rich soil of this region, which has some of the richest soil in the world. Many prairie plants can live for many decades, some even up to 100 years!

We hope you enjoy these unique tallgrass prairie plants as you hike!

**Purple Coneflower**
Flowers: Pink
Blooms: Late spring-fall

Also known as Echinacea, parts of this plant are used as an herbal remedy to treat colds and boost immunity.

**Wild Bergamot**
Flowers: Pink-purple
Blooms: Late spring-fall

Also known as “bee balm” because the leaves of this plant are said to relieve bee stings if chewed and put on the sting site. It is also used in herbal teas.

**Blazing Star**
Flowers: Pink-purple
Blooms: Midsummer-fall

Its flowers grow in a dense spike at the top of the plant and can reach 5 feet in height. Cultivars of this species are commonly grown in flower gardens.

**Wild Quinine**
Flowers: White
Blooms: Late spring-summer

Also known as “feverfew,” this plant has been used for centuries to treat fevers. Its dense, flat-toped flowers have a texture similar to cauliflower.

**Gray-headed Coneflower**
Flowers: Yellow
Blooms: Late spring-fall

The petals of this flower droop down from the center. The flowers boom on flexible stalks up to 4 feet tall. The dry seedheads are fragrant when crushed.

**White Wild Indigo**
Flowers: White
Blooms: Late spring-midsummer

The flowering stalks can be up to 6 feet tall. This plant is important in prairie habitats because it adds nitrogen to the soil.

**Rattlesnake Master**
Flowers: White
Blooms: Summer

The leaves of this plant resemble yucca. It was once thought to be an antidote for snake bites. Fibers in the leaves were used by Native Americans to make rope.

**Big Bluestem**
Flowers: Tiny, in long dense clusters
Blooms: Summer

This is the state grass of Illinois. It averages 3-6 feet tall but can grow 9 feet tall! It is also called “turkey-foot” because the flower heads resemble turkey toes.

**Indian Grass**
Flowers: Tiny, in feather-like clusters
Blooms: Summer-fall

Flowering stems are 7 feet tall. The flower heads are first reddish-brown, and then fade to grayish-brown.

**New England Aster**
Flowers: Purple
Blooms: Late summer-fall

This attractive plant can grow to be 4 feet tall, and is widely cultivated. The leaves provide food for many types of caterpillars.

**Sneezeweed**
Flowers: Yellow
Blooms: Late summer-fall

This plant’s slender flowering stalks can grow 2-8 feet tall.

**Tall Coreopsis**
Flowers: Yellow
Blooms: Summer-early fall

This plant grows up to 5 feet tall. Dried flowerheads were once used as snuff by pioneers.