GET TO KNOW NATIVE PRAIRIE PLANTS

Follow the clues to identify native prairie plants that thrive there — and in other places, too.
Get to Know Native Prairie Plants

Follow the clues to identify native prairie plants that thrive there — and in other places, too.

About the Activity
One thing we can do to help pollinators is to increase habitat for them to find food and nesting areas. Native prairie ecosystems offer great habitat for insect pollinators including many flowering plants with a good source of nectar (nectar is food for pollinators).

In this activity, you will learn about some different native prairie plants, how to identify them, and consider some ways to add native flowering plants to your own landscape at school, at home, and throughout your community.

This activity is part of our 4-H At-Home Native Bees Series. See the rest of the activities here.

Supplies

These simple supplies are all you’ll need for this activity.

- Native plant descriptions and hints PDF
- Answer sheet PDF
- Answer key PDF
- Pencil

Grades: 2-8

Topic: Environmental Education, Horticulture

Time: 30-60 minutes
Activity Steps

1. Work through each “Plant ID” Sheet. Read the description of the plant and look at the photo to see what it looks like. Use the description and hint to figure out the name of the plant. Be sure to try all 14, and write your answers on the answer sheet.

**DID YOU KNOW?**
Many prairie plants are great sources of nutrition for pollinators. Milkweed plants provide not only nectar for pollinators but are the only food source for caterpillars of the monarch butterfly. The native prairie plant called the cup plant actually holds water that birds drink from.

![Milkweed and Caterpillar](image1)

Additionally, the **Maximillian sunflower** is good for pollinators and as food for wildlife including quail, deer, and livestock.

![Maximillian Sunflower](image2)

2. Check your work against the answer key. How did you do?

**DID YOU KNOW?**
In addition to providing habitat for pollinators, prairies provide food and nesting ground for animals like birds, rodents, and other small mammals. For example, the tube-like flowers of foxglove beardtongue are attractive to hummingbirds!

![Hummingbird and Flowers](image3)

3. Try visiting a local prairie or other native habitat and see if you can find any of these plants. While you’re there, you might also try using a field guide to see if you can identify others.

**DID YOU KNOW?**
In a prairie, because there is high diversity of plants, flowers are blooming all season long. Ohio spiderwort blooms in early spring. Western ironweed blooms in late summer until the first frost. These plants provide an important food source for pollinators all through the growing season.

![Ohio Spiderwort](image4)

![Western Ironweed](image5)
Test Your Knowledge

See how much you’ve learned about pollination!

**QUESTION 1**
Which plant is important for monarch caterpillars?
- a. Ironweed
- b. Black-eyed Susan
- c. Milkweed
- d. Dandelions

**QUESTION 3**
Which native prairie plant holds water that birds can drink?
- e. Cup plant
- f. Compass plant
- g. Leadplant
- h. All of the above

**QUESTION 5**
Which prairie plant is good food for wildlife?
- i. Milkweed
- j. Larkspur
- k. Maximillian sunflower
- l. All are good for wildlife

**QUESTION 3**
When do flowers usually bloom in a native prairie?
- m. Summer
- n. Spring
- o. Fall
- p. All seasons but winter

**QUESTION 3**
Which plant has tube-like flowers that are attractive to hummingbirds?
- q. Illinois bundle flower
- r. Foxglove beardtongue
- s. Canada goldenrod
- t. Maximillian sunflower

Reflection Questions

**Bonus questions to inspire wonder.**

- What type of ecosystem is native to where you live? Visit a park or preserve with native habitat to see if you can find some prairie plants.
- Why is it important for pollinators like bees and butterflies to have plants blooming all year?
- What are some ways you could add native plants to the landscape around you?
- Why is a mowed lawn not as good for wildlife as a native prairie?
- Why are prairie plants good for the soil?
Take what you’ve learned to the next level to learn more and explore the possibilities.

Now that you can recognize some of the common plants around the prairie, you’ll appreciate seeing how pollinators and other animals interact with them. Pay attention to native bees, too, as they thrive in this habitat. There are many benefits to improving how we manage the land around us.

You can learn more about how our habitats also add value to humans through Ecosystem Services:

https://ecology.fnal.gov/ecosystem-services/
Career Connections

If you liked identifying native species of prairie plants, you might enjoy a career in STEM. STEM careers are exciting and rewarding, and you can pursue a STEM-related career wherever you live, whether you’re in a city, a rural community, or anywhere in between.

Watch this video and learn what it takes to be a field sales representative from Wyatt Jones of Bayer Crop Science.

Watch Video

Brought to you by:

No endorsement of these supporters’ products or services is granted or implied by 4-H. This work is supported by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, AFRI - Education and Workforce Development project 2021-67037-33376.
4-H at Home

| Know Your Native Prairie Plants |

To discover a wide selection of 4-H activities and experiences, visit 4-H.org/4HatHome

1. __________________________

2. __________________________

3. __________________________

4. __________________________

5. __________________________

6. __________________________

7. __________________________

8. __________________________

9. __________________________

10. __________________________

11. __________________________

12. __________________________

13. __________________________

14. __________________________

PLANT ID

Answer Sheet

4-H at Home | Know Your Native Prairie Plants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American Plum</th>
<th>Little Bluestem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big Bluestem</td>
<td>Maximilian Sunflower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-eyed Susan</td>
<td>Pale Purple Coneflower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butterfly Milk Weed</td>
<td>Rattlesnake Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada Wildrye</td>
<td>Switchgrass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cup Plant</td>
<td>Western Ironweed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foxglove Beardtongue</td>
<td>Swamp Milk Weed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plant ID #1

This showy plant is frequently grown from seed in home gardens. Its brilliant orange flowers attract butterflies, and its leaves are eaten by butterfly larvae. Historically, the root of this plant was chewed by as a cure for pleurisy and other pulmonary ailments.

Hint
Plant ID #2

A native prairie perennial, this sunflower is a desirable range plant, eaten by many livestock. These plants often form large colonies. A heavy crop of seeds is produced, thus it is also a valuable plant for wildlife. It was named for the naturalist Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied, Germany, who led an expedition into the American West in the 1830s.
Plant ID #3

This native prairie biennial forms a rosette of leaves the first year, followed by flowers the second year. It is covered with hairs that give it a slightly rough texture. This cheerful, widespread wildflower is considered an annual to a short-lived perennial across its range. Bright-yellow, 2-3 in. Wide, daisy-like flowers with dark centers are its claim to fame.

Hint
Plant ID #4

This native perennial plant is about 4-10’ tall and remains unbranched, except for the panicle of flowering stems near the apex. The central stem is thick, hairless, and four-sided. The large opposite leaves are up to 8” long and 5” across, which join together around the central stem to form a cup that can hold water. Many species of birds will drink water from this plant’s leaves.

Hint
Plant ID #5

The foliage of this robust perennial can be semi-evergreen in the South. Its erect, 2-5 ft. stems are topped with stalked clusters of white, tubular, unevenly five-lobed flowers which rise in pairs from the upper leaf axils. This plant frequented by hummingbirds and bumble bees for its pollen.

Hint

Plant Key #5
Plant ID #6

This plant is a native, perennial forb that can grow up to 3 feet in height. Pale pink, drooping petal-like ray florets surround the domed, reddish-brown center of disk florets that are rough and prickly to the touch. You can usually find this plant blooming during the summer months. The Indians used this plant's tap root for many medicinal purposes.

Hint

Plant Key #6
Plant ID #7

This native perennial plant is 2-5’ tall. The alternate leaves tend to occur near the base of the plant, although a few smaller leaves occur along the upper portion of the stem. These leaves are long and strap-like, rather stiff in texture, and up to 2½’ long and 2½” across. The entire plant is bluish or greyish green, and quite hairless. The top of the plant consists of several prickly balls of flowers that are individually about ½-1” across. These whitish green balls contain numerous small white flowers that are individually surrounded by prickly bracts.

Hint

Plant Key #7
Plant ID #8

This plant’s 3-5 ft. stems occur singly or in clumps, and are stout and hairy. Wide clusters of vibrant, red-violet flowers form at the ends of short branches near the top of the plant. Because the flowers are all of the disk variety, the 6 inch wide flower cluster has a fuzzy appearance. Long, lance-shaped leaves line the stems. This plant blooms late in the summer and blooms until frost.

Hint

Plant Key #8
Plant ID #9

This species is a warm season, perennial bunchgrass with blue-green stems 4-8 ft. tall. The seed head is usually branched into three parts and resembles a turkey’s foot. Fall color is maroonish-tan. This species is the star component of the Big Four native grass species that characterize the tallgrass prairies of central North America. Cattle love it so much that some ranchers refer to it as ice cream for cows.

Hint

Plant Key #9
Plant ID #10

This species is a native warm season perennial grass that is often grown as a forage crop, natural wildlife habitat, or, increasingly, as a bioenergy crop. This species can grow to more than 10 ft. tall and well-managed stands may last for decades. Once this species is established, its bunch-type growth habit makes it very competitive with weeds. However, it is not considered to be invasive. This species makes good roost cover for pheasants and quail.

Hint

Plant Key #10
Plant ID #11

This species is a perennial bunchgrass and is prominent in the tall grass prairie region. This species grows to a typical height of 3 feet. Although it has a blue tint in the spring, in fall, its predominant color is more red, which color it may retain throughout winter into spring. This species is one of the most common grasses throughout the Midwest, and it is a very valuable wildlife plant.

Hint

Plant Key #11
Plant ID #12

The erect or arching stems of this cool-season, short-lived perennial grow 2-4 ft. tall. Terminal, spike-shaped seed heads of oat-like seeds with long, bristly awns, cause the stems to bend and droop. This plant establishes easily, providing quick initial cover. It is a versatile, cool-season plant, requiring little to no maintenance. It provides great nesting cover for pheasants and quail.

Hint

Plant Key #12
Plant ID #13

This species is a thicket-forming shrub or small tree with short trunk, many spreading branches, broad crown, showy large white flowers. Its fragrant, white flowers occur on the plant before the leaves in spring. The fruit that follows ripens to a shiny, bright red in late summer. The short, crooked trunk — with scaly, black bark — supports a graceful, open crown. Fall foliage ranges from electric red to pale yellow. This plant's fruit are eaten fresh and used in jellies and preserves, and are also consumed by many kinds of birds.

Hint

Plant Key #13
Plant ID #14

This moisture-loving plant grows in sunny patches of wetlands (swamps, marshes, bogs). It has smooth narrow leaves and clusters of pink flowers that are attractive to butterflies. Milkweed is the only food source for monarch caterpillars.

Hint

Plant Key #14
Numbers on this sheet correspond with numbers on the bottom right corner of individual species sheets.

1. Butterfly Milk Weed
2. Maximilian Sunflower
3. Black-eyed Susan
4. Cup Plant
5. Foxglove Beardtongue
6. Pale Purple Coneflower
7. Rattlesnake Master
8. Western Ironweed
9. Big Bluestem
10. Switchgrass
11. Little Bluestem
12. Canada Wildrye
13. American Plum
14. Swamp Milkweed