



Tallgrass Prairie



"The immediate site of the post...opens out rapidly to the south in a beautifully undulating prairie."

Assistant Surgeon Joseph K. Barnes, describing the Fort Scott landscape in 1852

The Tallgrass Prairie : Home to American Indians

Not so very long ago, but before any notion of urban development, there existed in the mid-region of North America an intricate and fragile ecosystem known as tallgrass prairie. It gently blanketed over 250 million acres, crossing the U.S. from Canada down to Texas, and stretching from Indiana across the Kansas plains. This vast sea of native wildflowers and grasses was home to hundreds of animal species, ranging from the tiny deer mouse to the massive buffalo that roamed the wide-open prairie in abundance.

This wild and often harsh frontier was also home to several Native Indian tribes, including the Osage, the Sioux, the Pawnee, and other

proud peoples who formed a symbiotic relationship with the land. They had learned, over the course of some 10,000 years, which plants could be used for medicine and additional food resources. The use of fire to maintain and restore the vivacity of this important resource was also a technique handed down through tribal generations. Fire was a tool used to create space for fresh new grass shoots that drew large game.

Because the once plentiful tallgrass prairies played such a significant role in American Indian culture, and to preserve the memory of "...a beautifully undulating prairie...", the National Park Service has restored five acres of this precious grassland to its former splendor of 1843.

Fire in the Prairie



While Native Indians were using fire to clear large areas of land, there were also frequent instances of natural fires that spread across the prairies of Central and North America. Lightning was often the cause, and was much a part of the prairies as droughts, blizzards, insect and disease outbreaks, and tornadoes.

These natural disturbances played an important role in shaping and restoring prairie grassland. Periodic burning reduces fallen debris and improves the soil moisture, releasing nutrients that recycle materials through the biome.

Through the centuries, plants and animals of the prairies adapted to, and indeed evolved because of frequent fire disturbance. An example of this evolution can be found by examining prairie grasses. The largest growth of most grasses occurs below ground. They therefore are not damaged by surface fires and are able to quickly grow back after a seemingly devastating fire.

Today, the National Park Service uses careful and controlled burn techniques to manage several types of ecosystems, including the tallgrass prairie at Fort Scott National Historic Site.

In an effort to interpret a remnant of tallgrass prairie, Fort Scott National Historic Site maintains a short trail through the park. The trail is about 1/4 mile long, and takes approximately 15 minutes to walk. Some of the more common species of grasses and wildflowers can be viewed here. Visitors should use caution when walking the trail, especially in inclement weather, due to its unpaved and uneven footing.



Big Bluestem

The tallest of all the grasses, reaching 3 to 8 feet tall, Big Blue Stem is one of the most important. It is sometimes called “turkey foot” blue stem because the seed head branches into 3 parts, resembling a turkey foot. Growth begins in early April and seed stalks appear from late August to October.

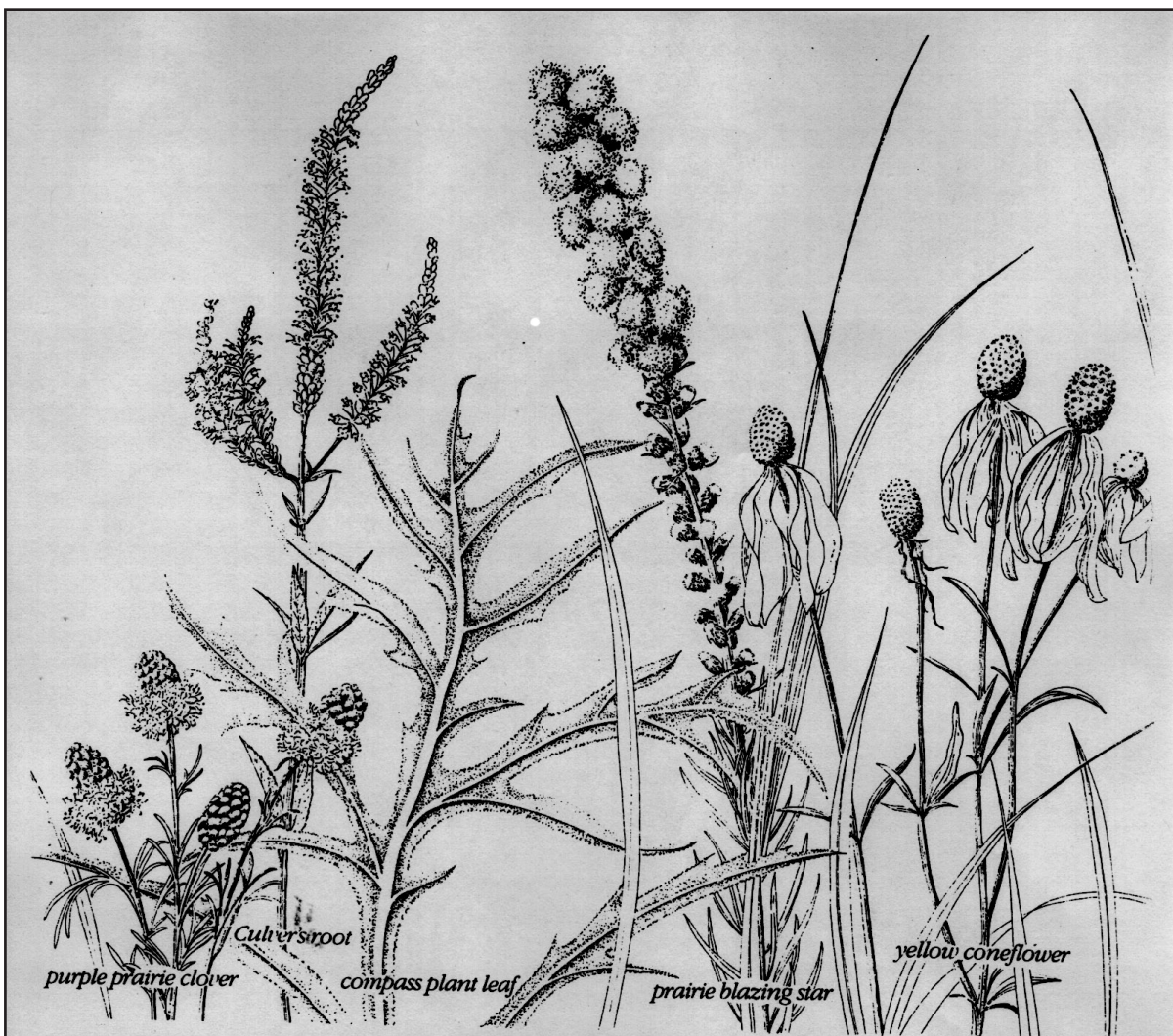
Switch Grass

A warm season, sod-forming tall grass with vigorous roots. It has rather large seed with sprangled type seed head on stalks 3 to 6 feet tall. It’s bluish green leaves are usually from 1/4 to 1/2 inch wide and 6 to 18 inches long. Switch grass provides excellent protective cover and stands well throughout the winter.



Indian Grass

A native warm season grass, Indian Grass is identified by its golden, plume-like seed head 4 to 12 inches long on stems 4 to 8 feet tall. Like Big Blue Stem, it may form patches of sod and occur in bunches, but it is readily distinguished from Big Blue by its slightly more erect habit of growth.



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Seasons of the Tallgrass Prairie
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