

TALLGRASS

FACTSHEET 4

O N T A R I O

Ontario Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna Association

Ground Cover

Tallgrass plants are well suited as ground cover for a wide variety of situations. They work well in soil restoration and reclamation projects owing to their 'clay-busting' properties and low nutrient and water needs. They are also quite effective when planted along streams where their deep roots stabilize erodible areas. In addition, tallgrass plants are not weedy in nature and do not spread quickly to re-colonize new ground. Thus, they are not invasive to agricultural fields or lawns.



Recommended Reading

Delaney, K., L. Rodger, P.A. Woodliffe, G. Rhynard, and P. Morris, 2000. *Planting the seed: A guide to establishing prairie and meadow communities in southern Ontario*. Burlington: Environment Canada. (Copies available through Tallgrass Ontario)

Packard, Stephen and Cornelia Mutel (eds.). 1997. *The tallgrass restoration handbook for prairies, savannas, and woodlands*. Society for Ecological Restoration. Washington D.C., Island Press.

Helpful Organizations

Conservation Authorities – To contact your local conservation authority, visit www.conservation-ontario.on.ca or call Conservation Ontario at 905-895-0716.

Carolinian Canada Coalition - To learn more about the stewardship programs offered through Carolinian Canada, visit their website at www.caroliniancanada.ca

Naturalist Clubs – To contact a naturalist club near you, call the Federation of Ontario Naturalists at 1-800-440-2366 or visit www.ontarionature.org.

Nature Conservancy of Canada, Ontario Region – For information on conservation easements or donations, call 1-866-281-5331 Ext. 0 or visit www.natureconservancy.ca

For more Information

For more information on tallgrass prairies and savannas and conservation efforts, contact Tallgrass Ontario. Tallgrass Ontario is a not-for-profit organization who's role is to direct and assist with the recovery of this endangered habitat. The organization has representatives from government, conservation groups, and other interested organizations and individuals. New members are always welcome.

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This factsheet is one in a series about Ontario's tallgrass prairie and savanna communities. Some of these include:

- #1 Get up, get out and see some tallgrass
- #2 Fire and the prairie
- #3 Identifying tallgrass prairie species
- #4 An owner's guide to managing tallgrass prairie and savanna
- #5 Looking for help?



Burnie the Badger

Illustrations by Judie Shore.

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An Owner's Guide to Managing Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna

As an owner of a remnant tallgrass prairie or savanna, you are part of a small but important group helping to conserve a rare piece of Ontario's natural heritage. Tallgrass habitats are owned by a wide range of landowners including farmers, railroad corporations, municipalities, government agencies, clubs, rural non-farm residents, and First Nation communities.

In Canada, tallgrass prairie and savanna is found in southern and northwestern Ontario and eastern Manitoba. In Ontario, tallgrass prairie and savanna, including alvars (calcareous prairies), once covered at least 1,000 km². Today only about 30 km² remains in approximately 200 highly fragmented known remnant sites. All but four or five of these sites are very small and thus threatened by invasive plants and animals. Approximately 80% of these sites are privately owned. Conservation of these remnant prairies and savannas is essential to the recovery of this rare habitat and the wildlife that depend on it.

This factsheet outlines the importance of native tallgrass prairie and savanna, techniques to care for your site and a description of legal tools for conservation.

Remnant – A small portion remaining of something that used to be much more extensive.



The Great Spangled Fritillary is one of many butterfly species that rely on tallgrass prairie flowers for nectar. Rosemary Scott

The Importance of Conservation

Tallgrass habitats survive in this province because landowners choose to leave part or all of their property in a natural state. The landowner tradition of taking pride in the land ensures there is a legacy to leave for future generations.

The most important thing a landowner of tallgrass prairie or savanna can do is to continue to protect it from the plough or bulldozer. This plant community is extremely rare in Ontario and may not survive further losses.

When native grassland goes, gone is the unique combination of plants (and their genes) that evolved over hundreds or thousands of years in that specific climate and soil. Gone is the home of songbirds, butterflies and wild animals. Gone too is an entire ecosystem that holds tremendous potential for the province's agricultural, pharmaceutical and eco-tourism industries.

Intact parcels of tallgrass are our model and seed source for recreating and expanding prairie and savanna in Ontario.

Caring for your Tallgrass Remnant

Tallgrass prairies and savannas are hardy ecosystems that require almost no maintenance, save one – fire. This vegetation community evolved with fire. Without regular burns, shrubs and trees invade and shade out the sun-loving tall grasses and flowers.

Many tallgrass prairies and savannas are degraded from decades of fire suppression (preventing burns) or inappropriate tree planting and are in need of restoration. To help these ailing remnants, several techniques can be used including:

- regular controlled burns;
- fall mowing and thatch removal;
- shrub and tree removal;
- selective herbicide treatments on non-native plants and aggressive shrubs and trees; and
- over-seeding with appropriate native prairie grass and flower seeds.

For more information on tallgrass maintenance and restoration, see the resources listed on the back page of this factsheet.

Prescribed or controlled burns should be undertaken every 3-5 years in a tallgrass prairie and every 10-15 years in a savanna, where safety permits.



Prescribed burns are used to kill invading shrubs, trees and non-prairie weeds.

Cathy Quinlan



Conservation of tallgrass habitats provides a legacy for future generations.

P. Allen Woodliffe

Conservation Options

Many landowners value the tallgrass prairie or savanna on their property and intend to conserve it for as long as they own the land. Some want to take steps to ensure the habitat is conserved for all time, while others prefer to leave the responsibility of habitat management to others. There are several options available to landowners to address these latter situations including leasing, conservation easements, sale and donation.

Be a Voluntary Steward

As voluntary stewards, landowners make a verbal agreement to maintain and protect their native prairie and to notify Tallgrass Ontario about any landuse changes or plans to transfer ownership of the property. In return, Tallgrass Ontario and partner organizations can help landowners with questions regarding grazing, plant species, donation, management, etc. In addition, free signs (8 x 10") are available that highlight the fact that a rare habitat is being conserved by the landowner.

Leasing

Leasing the tallgrass habitat portion of a property to a naturalist group or another conservation organization is a good option for landowners who do not want to deal with management issues, yet want to maintain ownership. Naturalist groups may be interested in maintaining the habitat and, in return, are allowed to visit the area or collect small amounts of seed for propagating new plants. They may even conduct inventories and provide the owner with a list of plants and animals found.



Plugs grown from local prairie seed are used to create new prairies.

Lindsay Rodger



Conservation Easement

Conservation easements are legal written agreements between a landowner and a conservation organization, such as a land trust or government agency, that conserves the land by placing restrictions on its use. It assures the landowner that their property will remain in a natural state without giving up use and enjoyment of the land. The agreement is registered on the title of the land for 999 years and is binding on future owners.



Gray-headed coneflower, a common prairie flower, blooms from early to mid summer.
Ross Brown

Sale

In exceptional cases, high quality sites are sometimes considered for purchase by conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy of Canada, local land trusts or other environmental/stewardship groups. These groups may be prepared to raise funds to purchase the most significant properties.

Donation

A landowner may choose to donate all or part of their land to a conservation organization to ensure the wildlife habitat is protected forever. Lands that qualify as ecologically sensitive are eligible under the federal government's Ecological Gifts Program where individuals receive a federal tax credit (corporations receive a deduction) for the value of the land donated. The amount of the credit or deduction is 17% of the first \$200 of land value and 29% of the remaining. Only 25% of the capital gain associated with the donation is taxable.

Locally-based Economic Activity

There are many opportunities to gain income from your tallgrass habitat without destroying it. If carried out

wisely and in an environmentally sustainable manner, a prairie or savanna can provide income indefinitely. Some of these opportunities include:

- harvesting, packaging and marketing of native seed for use in the horticultural, agricultural and environmental sector;
- using the prairie flowers as a summer nectar source for honeybees; and

- grazing livestock in late summer when cool season pastures are exhausted (many tallgrass plants are nutritious to cattle).

Remnants also provide a seed source for endeavours involving growing specific prairie species as a crop for the agricultural, pharmaceutical, bio-fuel and paper and fibreboard industries.



Staff from the Rural Lambton Stewardship Network collect seeds for a tallgrass seed nursery.
P. Allen Woodliffe