

TALLGRASS

O N T A R I O

Ontario Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna Association

PRINCIPLE #1

FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF TALLGRASS PRAIRIE AND SAVANNAH FRAGMENTS IN SOUTHERN ONTARIO

Tallgrass Ontario (TGO) has created a series of six principles to offer support to the landowner in southern Ontario who wishes to maintain and enhance their tallgrass habitat, and are derived from the experiences of tallgrass habitat managers from across the eastern portion of North America. These principles apply to all the various tallgrass habitats in southern Ontario including prairies, savannahs, woodlands, and most types of alvars. More information on what, exactly, constitutes tallgrass habitats is provided on the TGO website. In addition, please refer to the Further Readings section appended to these principles.

Landowners are excellent caretakers and stewards of our natural environments. The day-to-day observations of landowners are one of the most important ways that our knowledge of how to successfully manage habitats will increase.

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USE LOCAL SEEDS

In addition to spending time in and around your own prairie, it's a good idea to go out and observe other prairies in your area. This will give you ideas about the diversity and condition of your own patch of tallgrass. It may be the case that increasing the bio-diversity of your tallgrass is an option. Remember that we measure such diversity in many ways; two of the most important of which are genetic diversity and species diversity. In other words, it may be good for your site to not only have many different types of species, but many different individuals of each species. It's also not a bad idea to have several patches or locations of the same species within your prairie, ensuring that no single event can wipe-out all the individuals of that particular species. So, one of the things that you can do is to take seeds from plants in one area of your patch and broadcast them in a different area of the patch. This helps to carry seeds across your patch in the absence of other, more natural, methods of seed transportation.

BUT, and this is a BIG BUT, do not import seeds or plants to your prairie that originate from outside your immediate area. Doing this introduces new genetic material and new plants that are not adapted to your area, that are not native to your area, and, in the worst case, that could become an aggressive invasive and actually damage tallgrass and other types of native habitat. This is a very real danger; consider the impacts of purple loosestrife, the common house sparrow, and the common starling, to name just three such invasive species, for a moment.

Tallgrass habitat is in an extremely fragile state in Ontario at the moment, with less than 1% remaining in an ecologi-

cally healthy state, and it is vulnerable to any large disturbance, such as one caused by an aggressive invasive. Be cautious. Our strong advice is that you only introduce plants and seeds to your tallgrass patch that originate from no more 100 km away of your site. In addition, check to make sure that those plants 100 km away are actually native to that site, and not introduced species themselves. Keep in mind, too, that there are many different types of tallgrass habitat, each adapted to particular local microclimates and local micro-geomorphology. So, for instance, do not expect plants that have been growing on a deep-soil black oak savanna to thrive, or even to grow, in a shallow soil, nutrient poor sandy tallgrass patch.

Finally, please be aware that there are number of very important issues that still need to be resolved around wild plant and wild seed collection and transplantation. Of course, it is illegal to trespass to conduct such activities. It is also illegal to collect plants or seeds from plants that are listed at-risk in our province without special permission of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Finally, though, even in the case of more common plants (and remember that with less than 1% remaining of our original prairie in Ontario virtually no tallgrass species is truly common) there are many open questions about how much seed, or how many plants, it is ecologically safe and appropriate to collect from an individual stand. Before engaging in this type of activity, please contact TGO or another such conservation organization to get an update on current policies and recommendations. It is always tragic when a plant species goes extinct because of the collecting activities of well-meaning conservationists.

FURTHER READING



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