

TALLGRASS

O N T A R I O

Ontario Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna Association

PRINCIPLE #3

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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WORK TOWARDS A CIRCLE



A possible exception to the above rule occurs when an attempt is made to link two existing patches of tallgrass habitat with a corridor; and you may, indeed, be in a situation where this is a possibility and you have the time and resources on hand to attempt this. However, be aware that to be ecologically effective, such a corridor should be several tens of meters wide. Often, it is more ecologically beneficial to tallgrass to increase the width of an existing patch, even if that means changing the land use of an adjacent field to something a bit more ecologically friendly yet still not tallgrass, than it is to try and increase the length of a patch.

The above is particularly the case with what we call “railroad prairies;” prairie fragments that exist along old or currently used railway right-of-ways. These prairies were formerly very common in Ontario because fires created by the sparks thrown out by older locomotives kept the woody growth in check. However, they are now disappearing at an alarming rate because their long skinny shape makes invasion by weedy, non-prairie species very easy, especially since newer locomotives no longer produce their necessary sparks. If you are managing such a railway prairie, the best thing that you can do is to try and expand the width of prairie, or at least create areas of adjacent benign land use at various nodes along the track. These nodes will serve as seed reservoirs and refuge for prairie species. Often, this strategy is far more ecologically effective than trying to maintain a long skinny patch along the entire length of the railway.

Ecologically, any patch of habitat is stronger if it closer to a circle in shape than to long, skinny rectangle. The reason for this is that the rounder a patch is the more ecologically secure then center is, since outside influences can't penetrate so easily deeper into the patch. In a long skinny rectangle, on the other hand, outside influences, be they foreign seeds, predatory animals, or overspray, can easily cut across the entire patch at many locations.

What this means is that you should try and manage your patch of tallgrass in such a way as to embed it within a circle, a square, a triangle, or a thicker rectangle. So, if you have the space and inclination to add new areas of tallgrass, add them to the sides instead of to the ends of your existing patch. If you can't do this, try and create more ecologically benign land uses next to your tallgrass patch; a pasture, for instance, or even a woodland, works very well next to a tallgrass patch.

FURTHER READING



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