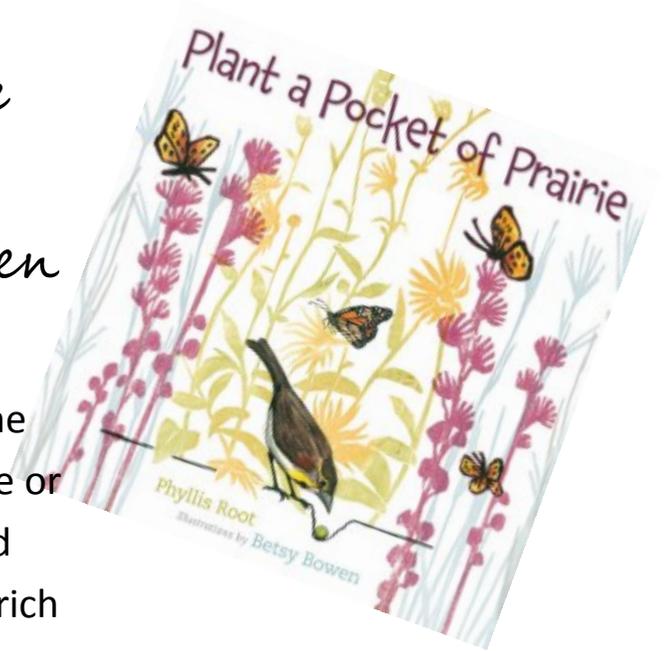


# *Plant a Pocket of Prairie*

By: Phyllis Root

Illustrations by: Betsy Bowen



When we think of gardening with children, the first thing that comes to mind is often vegetable or kitchen gardening. Have you ever considered wildlife gardening? It is a whole new way to enrich the lives of children.

*Plant a Pocket of Prairie* explores the prairie ecosystem. The free verse text starts out by explaining

*“Almost all gone now  
to farm and town and city,  
even before we knew  
all of the things a prairie could do.”*

The book goes on to highlight examples of relationships between specific plants and animals in the prairie ecosystem, such as between foxglove tongue and hummingbirds; monarch butterflies and milkweeds; and goldfinches and sunflowers. The book includes a list of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, insects and plant communities commonly found in prairies.



# PRAIRIE CONNECTIONS

Phyllis Root starts by disclosing how the prairies are almost gone, less than one percent of native prairies remains.

**ACTIVITY**—Demonstrate the loss of native prairie

## K—2

Have students line out 100 4X4 squares of colored paper representing 21,000,000 acres of native IL prairie. Hold up 1 square—explain this is what is left., about 2100 acres

ASK : where did the prairie go?

## 3—5

Using an 8.5 X 11 sheet of copy paper, tell students that this sheet represents the 21,000,000 acres of prairie that existed in IL. in the early 1800's.

Fold the paper in half and tear. With each fold/tear, tell students how many acres is left from chart.

Repeat the process until the paper has been reduced in size to represent the remaining 2100 acres of native prairie.

### ACRES

21,000,000 (early 1800's)

10,000,000

5,000,000

2,500,000

1,250,000

625,000

312,000

150,000

75,000

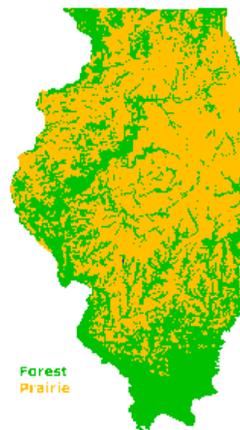
37,500

18,750

9,000

4,500

2,000 (number of native prairies that exist today)



### THNIK ABOUT THIS:

In Illinois, only 1/100th of 1 percent of native prairie still exists. Native tall grass prairie is the **MOST ENDANGERED** ecosystem in North America

## JEWELS OF THE PRAIRE

Grass, it covers the bare earth , softens the beat of the rain, soaks water gently into the ground and protects the soil from the wind. Prairies are vast areas of level or rolling land, with deep fertile soil, and covered with grasses and flowers, mostly without trees. Prairies dominated the landscape when the first Europeans arrived 300 years ago. Most of the landscape was covered with prairie grass and flowers, in places the grass was so tall that it was necessary to stand on the back of a horse to see over the top. There was nothing to compare to the sea of grass they encountered, so the settlers used the French word, "Prairie" which means meadow. To the early explorers and settlers, the prairie was a place of beauty and a source of plentiful game.

Prairie plants have learned to live in an open environment, exposed to the sun and wind, which dry the plants very quickly, some plants roll up their leaves or have fine hairs that reduce moisture loss. About 2/3 of the growth of prairie plants is below ground, these deep roots help pull up ground water in times of drought and also protect the plants from extremes in climate. Prairies are more than a sea of grasses, they also contain beautiful and colorful flowers.

### ACTIVITY

Using the chart below, demonstrate by creating a wall of prairie, what the prairie would have been like to a child in the early 1900's.

Plant	height
Big Blue Stem	6—8 feet
Indian Grass	5—9 feet
Compass Plant	8—10 feet
Prairie Blazing star	5—6 feet
Purple Coneflower	3—5 feet
Goldenrod	3—4 feet

# PRAIRIE ECOLOGY

A prairie is a natural ecosystem. An ecosystem is a place where plants and animals fit together. The Tallgrass prairie is a special kind of ecosystem. Read about the ways three animals live in the Tallgrass prairie, then you will understand more about how things fit together there.

*Above the prairie you will see the skipper butterfly. It depends on the plants here throughout its life. Butterflies begin life as an egg. The female lays eggs on a plant inside a shell to protect them. The larva of a butterfly eats through that shell. What is a larva? It looks like a hairy worm, its outside is flexible but tough. Scientists also call this stage of the butterfly's life a grub, it has no wings. It is also called a caterpillar. The larva eats the plant leaves, as it eats it grows quickly. It will shed (molt) its outer layer of skin as it grows. After some time, the larva makes a kind of shell called a pupa. Inside that shell, it does something amazing, it turns into a butterfly with wings—this takes about 1 week.*

*The butterfly starts out with damp wings, they have been crumpled inside the pupa, so the first thing it does is spread its wings and dries them. Within 2 hours, the butterfly is ready to fly. The skipper flies to find food in the Tallgrass prairie.*

*On the ground, and below it, you will find the ground squirrel. This animal is about 1 foot long and lives in big families. It has a brown coat to camouflage it as it moves along the ground. Animals use camouflage, color, to blend in with their habitat, as a kind of protection. The ground squirrel is an herbivore, that means it eats plants. It eats grass so there is a lot of food in the Tallgrass prairie. It hibernates in the winter.*

*On the ground, in the past, you would have seen the bison. This big herbivore grazed on the plants of the Tallgrass prairie, mainly grasses and sedges. The bison played an essential role in shaping the ecology of the Tallgrass prairie. They grazed heavily on native grasses and disturbed the soil with their hooves, allowing many plant and animal species to flourish.*

## **ACTIVITY—DESIGN A PRAIRIE PLANT**

All 3 of those animals depend on prairie plants. Design a plant that would grow on the prairie. Your plants must resist high wind, have seeds, and strong roots. It's job is to provide food for animals.

**EXTENSION**—show the food chain that would exist between your plant and the animals of the prairie.