

## Prairie Forb and Plant Identification

Information taken from [http://www.ehow.com/list\\_5763161\\_prairie-plant-identification.html](http://www.ehow.com/list_5763161_prairie-plant-identification.html)



**Prairies**, found exclusively in the middle of North America, are a type of grassland dominated by herbaceous **plants**. Nearly treeless, prairies were vast expanses of waving grass until they were nearly wiped out by waving grain. Identifying prairie plants as they germinate is very difficult...even for experienced **botanists**. Plants become more identifiable as they **flower** and mature. An identification key is very useful.

### Prairie Plants

Prairies range in habitat between dry, **mesic** (middle) and wet, with ranges in between. They stretch 1.4 million square miles from Alberta to Texas and the Rockies to Indiana. Knowing the type of **habitat** where plants grow helps identify them. Mixed grasses grow in the central Great Plains with short grass in the rain shadow of the Rockies. Wet climates are to the north, where the tall grass prairie grows and plants can reach ten feet. While some plants are common to all prairie areas, others are unique to their habitat.

### Native Prairie Grasses

Native grasses are members of the one-leaf (monocot) family. When they germinate, only one leaf emerges from the seed (broadleaf plants send out two leaves and are called dicots.) **Native** grasses can be identified by the way their blades connect to and grow from the main stem. Common Indian Grass leaves grow at a 45-degree angle, while big bluestem leaves grow straight up from a hairy stem base for an inch, then bend to parallel the ground. Each native

grass has its own leaf-stem connection type. Subtle variations require careful observation and reference to a key. Native grasses are tall. Big bluestem, with characteristic stem segments that alternate between red, yellow or pink and blue, grows to seven feet.

### Forb Family Identification

Native forb (broad leaf) plants are identified by their flowering traits and **leaf** patterns and shapes. Often native prairie varieties have leaves that feel very rough, almost like sandpaper. Roll the leaves between your fingers: Many produce a pleasant, distinct fragrance. Height is a giveaway; native plants are taller (prairie dock grows to 10 feet) and healthier looking than non-native species, since they are resistant to native insects. Their extensive **root** systems bring them water and **nutrients**; some are longer than the plant is high. Plant identification charts identify forbs by flower color. The shades are sometimes difficult to classify into white, yellow, orange, pink, maroon, blue or green, so consulting several **categories** is necessary. The flower shape and how and where it grows on the plant are other individual characteristics. Count the petals, inspect the seed heads and compare them with photos in an illustrated guide. More detailed guides help with difficult identifications. Native prairie forb families include **sunflowers**, carrot, mint and **figworts**.



### Prairie Flower ID

Prairie flowers - generally known as wild flowers - grow naturally in a variety of places, depending upon your geographic location. Some of these flowers grow in rural, grassy metropolitan areas such as parks or heavily wooded areas. Certain prairie flower species are even grown in gardens. It is possible to identify specific species of these flowers based on certain characteristics.

### Purple False Foxglove

The purple false **foxglove** is an annual plant that is about 2 inches in height and its dark green branches sprawl out in growth along the ground. The dark green leaves on the branches grow up to 1 to 3 inches in length. Some of the

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top stems have purplish flowers that grow up to 1 or 2 inches wide. This plant does best in soil with an acidic pH level.

### Wild Garlic

Wild garlic is a **perennial** prairie flower that has curved basal leaves that grow up to 12 inches in length. A cluster of small star-shaped white flowers form on each stem. The flower can vary from light pink, pink or white petals. This plant does best in moist soil conditions with partial shade.

### Cliff Onion

The cliff onion is a prairie flower that has sparse curved basal leaves that grow up to 1 inch in length. The purple petals are star-shaped and grow up to 3 inches wide on top of a flowering **stalk**. These plants do best in well-drained, rocky soil that contains limestone.

### Butterfly Weed

The **butterfly weed** is a prairie flower that is a type of milkweed and is a popular plant for gardeners because of the brightly colored orange flowers growing near the top of tall stems. It is common to see butterflies, such as the monarch, attracted to this plant, which is where the name is derived from. These flowers do best in dry, sunny conditions with dry to slightly moist soil because they require little water.



### Western Ragweed

The prairie flower western **ragweed** is present all over North America. This plant is somewhat small and only grows up to 2 feet in height. The stems have hundreds of white hairs all over and the plant produces small, yellow flowers. Western ragweed does best in areas of bright sunlight with soil low in nutrients.