

The Garden Club of Michigan

Interpretation of 2026 theme: **American Grasslands, Lost Prairie**

As America celebrates its 250th birthday, it is important to look back to the land that brought about such intense aspiration and desire, and inspired a growing swell of immigrants who longed for freedom and a chance to make a new life in a new land. The great American Prairie was a magnet to those who knew how to farm old world crops. Tens of thousands flocked to use the tremendous resources of soil this wilderness harbored. Early settlers were awestruck at the richly flowering plains, and early botanists were enthralled at the magnificence and range of new genera and species. Their attempts to record and catalogue all the plants are hugely important guides to botanists and ecologists today. You can even find some of those records of early Michigan plant records online in Michigan Flora from the University of Michigan website and the Michigan State University Plant Communities materials.

The Heartlands of America *are* the Prairie States and territories. They were filled with waves of European settlers and provided talents and great ideas that built a nation and peopled its cities. They fed those cities with resources, food and also intangible spiritual principles necessary for nation building. These riches were imagined to be inexhaustible. It is fair and honest to note there were deep losses to the indigenous people who accomplished a distinguished and heroic survival to be still present and a part of the current national picture.

Living In A Post Wild World, to borrow a title from Thomas Rainer and Claudia West's inspiring book, we are learning to value the diversity of life that took hundreds of thousands of years to develop in those plains, savannahs, grasslands and great swamps. A part of that learning is not to reject knowing what has been done but to be purposeful in restoring and preserving what is aesthetic and necessary for our health and survival on the planet. This garden is a nostalgic reminder of what we have drastically changed and to celebrate the precious remnants that still record, inspire and rejuvenate us.

A hand made, old rusty, metal flag that could have hung on the side of a shed or barn for many years is mounted on a split rail fence, itself an icon of American farms and rural life. A stump of an old plum tree, sculptural and beautiful in its fallen state, is an impromptu seat for a wearied farm hand, hiker passing by or maybe just a place for a red-tailed hawk to alight and finish its catch. A native *Ruellia* seedling has grown up against it as the renewing cycle of life always continues. The grasses are varied heights and will come into their own in July. For early summer, grasses provide a textured matrix for forbs (grassland perennials) to bloom in their cycle of pollen and nectar hosting for bees, moths and butterflies. White roses are once more reaching up to lean on the rail fence and asters and grasses will soften the rail's hard lines as the season progresses. Settlers brought old world plants with them for their gardens and herb beds and learned from what indigenous people shared about native plants. You see both annual and perennial *Salvias* planted here, and white *Calamint* among *Blue-eyed Grass*, *Purple Love Grass*, and *Little Bluestem*. *Columbine* for bees and humming birds gives way to white spikes of *Liatris*, to name just a few of the plants in this little slice of life from many parts of the world. A hand-carved granite bowl that lies between the straw and wood chip path, reminds us how precious is the resource of fresh water. Later, Abyssinian *Gladiolus* (*Gladiolus* 'Murielae') bulbs will bloom with white, star-like flowers among the grasses. Their beauty yet another symbol of people who were brought to these shores without their consent and have contributed so greatly to its wealth and strength, becoming a strong fiber in the weaving of a national fabric.

We have a song that is often sung at patriotic events. It starts with:

God bless America, Land that I love.

Stand beside her, and guide her through the night with a light from above.

From the mountains to the prairies....

Such is our hope today, to be firmly and resiliently planted in American Grasslands, guided by wise choices that build and sustain our future in this place.

The Garden Club of Michigan, Plot #8 Plant List

1. Schizachyrium scoparium 'Standing Ovation', Little Bluestem*
2. Molinia arundinacea 'Skyracer', Moor Grass
3. Eragrostis spectabilis, Purple Love Grass*
4. Sporobolus heterolepis, Prairie Dropseed*
5. Calamintha nepeta 'Montrose White', Calamint
6. Symphyotrichum novae-angliae, New England Aster*
7. Sisyrinchium angustifolium 'Lucerne', Blue-eyed Grass*
8. Liatris spicata 'Floristan White', Blazing Star*
9. Salvia pratense 'Rhapsody in Blue', Meadow Sage
10. Aquilegia 'Early Bird Blue', Columbine
11. 'Sally Holmes' Climbing Shrub Rose*
12. Salvia 'Skyscraper Dark Purple', Annual Hybrid Salvia*
13. Salvia guaranitica, Black and Blue Salvia
14. Gladiolus callianthus 'Murielae' (Acidanthera), Abyssinian Gladiolus
15. Ruellia humilis
16. Carex rosea
17. Pycnanthemum flexuosum

*Indicates required elements.