

Get Out And Enjoy The Wildflowers

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I've had many folks comment on the fantastic wildflower season that we have been having so far this spring. I strongly encourage you to get out and drive through the hills if you haven't already. Spring may have been late arriving, but it's making up for lost time. The recent rains haven't totally erased the impacts of last year's drought, but the hills are green, for now, and looking wonderful!

It is sometimes easy to look at the hills from a distance and see "a prairie" and fail to recognize what a complex ecosystem that prairie actually is. If you get out into the prairie and start walking through it (Geary County State Fishing Lake is a good place to do this) the complexity soon becomes obvious.

You can easily have 15 to 20 different grass species growing in any prairie area of a few acres or more. At this time of year the cool season grasses like the annual bromes or the Kentucky bluegrass may show up, but there's also less well known species like the big bushy headed Canada Wildrye, the bluegreen leafed western wheatgrass, the tiny little Scribner's panicum and the low growing but bushy headed prairie Junegrass. These are all heading out now and will slowly become less obvious as the real kings of the tall grass prairie: big and little bluestem, indiangrass and switchgrass become dominant in August. But in between there's the enigmatic eastern gamagrass the delightful sideoats grama and the playful porcupinegrass. You need to ask me about the last one!

Many people have asked me why the wildflowers are so spectacular this year and I'm hard pressed to give one answer. Lack of burning this year, as well as lack of standing dead grass from last year may be part of it. Nutrients not used by plants during last year's drought may have encouraged extra growth this year. The late spring and the average to slightly cooler than average temperatures have compressed more species into blooming at the same time than normal. So just as the prairie itself is complex, the reason for the amazing displays this year is equally complex.

A recent morning drive through the hills yielded over two dozen plants in bloom. Enjoyable was the Missouri eveningprimrose with it's huge yellow four petaled flowers. The white and serrateleaf eveningprimrose, while not as individually striking as the Missouri eveningprimrose, are also enjoying a banner year. Even though it can become a problem in pastures, the rough-leaved dogwood is in bloom now and is attracting butterflies, bees and hummingbirds to its complex white flowers.

The penstemon is the best that I can ever remember seeing in the hills. The spikes of white to lavender bell shaped flowers on a spike, are just everywhere. The blossoms themselves have an amazing feel somewhere between velvet and silk! Then we have those wildflowers with wonderful names like purple poppymallow, western marbleseed and flattop hymneopappus.

While pretty to look at, many of these wildflowers, or forbs, are valuable to the diversity of the prairie. Cattle graze on many of them and some are legumes, adding protein to the bovine diet and nitrogen to the soil. As long as we don't have excessive pasture wide herbicide spraying for brush control, the management that the ranchers give these prairies continues to encourage the wildflowers. So take advantage of this beautiful weather and wonderful spring, step away from the television and the computer and get out to enjoy the tall grass prairie!