

Olivette is set to begin three-year project to restore tall-grass prairie

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One day tall wild grasses bending in the wind, wildflowers, dragonflies and butterflies will greet the runners and dog owners who use the trails at Stacy Park, at Olive and Warson roads in Olivette.

The city's Parks and Beautification Committee will embark on Saturday on a three-year project to restore part of the park to tall-grass prairie. The committee will begin seeding two acres of the 35-acre park's northwest quadrant with 50 species of wildflowers and 10 species of wild grasses.

When the prairie restoration project reaches fruition, the committee expects that monarch butterflies will lay their eggs in the park's butterfly milkweed, a plant that is native to Missouri and essential to the butterflies' survival.

Long before Olivette was founded, the northern and western sections of the state, along with a big part of St. Louis, were covered in tall-grass prairie, according to Scott Woodbury, a horticulturist with the Missouri Botanical Garden's Shaw Nature Reserve. He explained the process of prairie restoration to the City Council at a meeting last week.

Several smaller sites around the area have been seeded with wildflowers and wild grasses in recent years, including a restoration project at the junction of Interstates 270 and 44 and projects in Maplewood and Compton Heights. The Shaw reserve in Gray Summit has been experimenting with prairie restoration for 25 years.

Woodbury explained that it takes a minimum of three years to restore land to a prairie state. The seeding itself can be done quickly. In Olivette, a team of volunteers, including members of Olivette in Bloom and the parks committee, will handle the task beginning at 9 a.m. Saturday.

Tony Finlay, Olivette's director of parks and recreation, said that the northwest quadrant of the park was dominated by a steep slope and that planting the seeds in frozen ground would draw the seed into the ground. That is why they are beginning the process in mid-winter.

In the first year after seeding, weeds must be killed with herbicide, burned or pulled by hand. In Olivette, volunteers will mow, apply weedkiller and pull weeds by hand rather than using fire, which Woodbury thinks is unnecessary to restore prairieland. If the weeds are not removed, they would crowd out and deprive prairie plants of sunshine.

In the second year, some wildflowers may appear, and the prairie is left alone to grow. By the third year, it actually starts to look like a prairie, with tall grasses and brightly colored wildflowers in full bloom. Mowing the land every two to three years helps to prevent trees from growing in the prairie.

A similar project in Stacy Park was tried about four years ago, according to Peter Hoch, a member of the committee who works as a botanist at the Missouri Botanical Garden. The land was seeded, but the project failed because of a lack of follow-up. "It just fell through the cracks," he said. "I think this time we're on the right track."

Restoring prairie is becoming a popular landscaping solution for area businesses because of its low maintenance requirements. Maritz Corp. planted prairie grasses and wildflowers at its Fenton campus about 13 years ago, and the new Alberici building in Overland will be landscaped entirely with wetlands and prairie plants, according to Woodbury. The Alberici project will be seeded this winter.

Woodbury said the goal of the Olivette prairie was to allow people to interact with nature. "It will incorporate paths so people can move through the space and understand that we are a part of this land, and we have an enormous ability to restore it," he said.

Tall-grass prairie was native to Missouri because the soil here is richer, whereas shorter-grass prairie was more common in Nebraska and the Rocky Mountain states, according to Woodbury. Planting prairie grasses helps to restore rich soil in the ground because of the deep root systems of these plants.

Woodbury also said that contrary to a television commercial for a popular allergy medicine, goldenrod does not cause hay fever because the pollen is so big it falls to the ground rather than being blown by the wind.

The Shaw Nature Reserve will donate the seeds for the Olivette project.

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Want to know more?

Seed: Help Olivette in Bloom when it seeds the northwest quadrant of Stacy Park, Olive and Warson roads, with prairie grasses and wildflowers at 9 a.m. Saturday.

Read: Learn more about plants that are native to Missouri at www.grownative.org.

Visit: Missouri Botanical Garden Nature Reserve, off Interstate 44 at Gray Summit. It's open year-round from 7 a.m. until sunset.