

REVOLUTIONARY THINKING

In the garden surrounding a lakeside house in Connecticut, Larry Weaner has created a prairie garden of North American natives that puts ecology centre stage

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IN BRIEF

What A native grass and wildflower prairie that forms part of a lakeside garden.

Where Connecticut, USA.

Size Two acres.

Climate Continental with winter temperatures falling as low as -26°C, and warm, humid summers.

Soil Calcareous loam.

Hardiness zone USDA 5b.

Paths through the prairie are mown wide enough for visitors to walk without being drenched from plants that have flopped over in the rain. Colourful, late-flowering perennials, many of them daisy family members, combine with tall grasses to create a natural-looking tapestry of colours and textures.

Along the edge of Lake Wononscopomuc in Litchfield County, Connecticut you'll find many gardens with neat, manicured lawns. Not that of Liz Glazer and Bill Montgomery who both thought a lawn too boring and suburban for such a pretty rural place. They wanted something wilder for their weekend home; a garden that would offer year-round beauty and be easier to maintain on the steeply sloping site, so turned to landscape architect Jamie Purinton, who specialises in natural, ecological gardens, for ideas. She suggested a meadow for part of the garden that would sweep along the drive, around the house and down to the lake, and in 2009 she brought in wildflower planting expert, Larry Weaner.

Larry is the author, with Thomas Christopher, of the award-winning book *Garden Revolution* and is behind one of the key developments in US garden design over the past few years: the use of native, North American plants. His landscape design practice Larry Weaner Landscape Associates (LWLA) combines design with environmental science. Larry may add or take out some plants for aesthetic reasons – adding design to ecology – but unlike conventional designs where plants are picked to fit a particular aesthetic, for Larry plants are the starting point. “I’m putting plants together that are right for the habitat and work together, that comes first,” he explains.

The plants Larry uses are adapted to the soil and climate of a specific site and for Liz and Bill’s garden, he created seed mixes tailored to the site’s varied soil types – damp near the lake, dry on the slopes – combined with some container-grown plants, but all are American natives, many from the New England region.

When Jamie first suggested a meadow Liz and Bill imagined classic French fields of waving grasses and poppies. What Larry has created is less French more American and should more correctly be termed a prairie. The flora is sufficiently diverse to remain sensitive to the garden’s overall aesthetic. Along the driveway, ▷

Right The prairie culminates in a lawn offering views over Lake Wononscopomuc. Near the water’s edge moisture-loving *Eupatorium maculatum* flourishes, surrounded by the shorter *Symphotrichum novae-angliae* and *S. racemosum*. Tall planting close to the lake’s edge also helps to keep geese out of the garden as they don’t like to walk through vegetation they can’t see over.

British prairies

Would a prairie using American natives work in the UK? Although the prairie plants used in this garden are not native to northern Europe, many have been part of our garden history for almost 200 years, and, with a few exceptions, they have behaved well. Most are an excellent source of nectar for pollinators in late summer and autumn, at a time when our native species have little to offer. They are also strong growers on fertile soils, so it is no surprise that for more than 20 years researchers in the UK and in Germany have been looking at using them to create colourful low-maintenance combinations for public space plantings.

Many of the species used in this prairie are already familiar to British gardeners as border plants, but they also will flourish in a naturalised, prairie-style planting, although you will need to cut back early spring grass. Among the toughest survivors for prairie-planting are two non-invasive goldenrods, *Solidago rugosa* and *Solidago rigida*, tall yellow daisy *Rudbeckia laciniata*, some of the asters, such as blue *Symphotrichum laeve* and white *Eurybia divaricata*, along with the tall, pink-flowered species of *Eupatorium*, such as *Eupatorium maculatum*. Earlier in the year, there are several species and cultivars of the prairie bulb genus *Camassia* that will easily naturalise in grass.



▷ for example, Liz and Bill asked for the planting to be kept low so they didn't lose sight of the retaining stone walls. Closer to the house the couple wanted the prairie to have more of a grassy feel, so Larry picked flowering species, including *Liatris spicata* and *Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*, that have narrow grassy foliage and set them among short-growing grasses, such as *Schizachyrium scoparium*.

Liz and Bill also wanted lots of colour, and love the fact that colours changes with the seasons, with the bright greeny-yellow of the umbellifer *Zizia aurea* in early May, giving way to the pink-white flower spikes of *Penstemon digitalis* and then to the indigo-blue flowers spikes of *Baptisia australis*. Over time the composition of the prairie will change as plants take hold. Larry expects change to be slow, as he has largely kept out the tallest grasses. "Species such as *Panicum virgatum* are very competitive, so we use them in isolated clumps," he explains. "But they're keystone plants for the community and I really don't want to exclude them entirely."

In late winter the prairie is cut back, although Larry is reluctant to use the word 'maintenance'. All processes carried out in a naturalistic garden, he points out, will impact on the species mix, so its design is always an ongoing process. For Liz and Bill change is part of the pleasure. "It is remarkably changeable, week by week, season by season and year by year," says Bill. "It's an organic and wild thing; it decides what will thrive and where. That is one of its joys and surprises." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Larry Weaner Landscape Associates at lweanerasociates.com

Turn the page for 16 key prairie plants

Clockwise from top left

Rudbeckia triloba provides a splash of yellow near the lake. It is a short-lived species that can die out over time to be replaced by longer-lived species.

The walk up to the guest house is lined with several species of aster, including the New England *Symphotrichum novae-angliae*. On slopes they are more likely to survive competition from grasses over time.

Tall pink Eupatorium maculatum frames a gate separating the prairie from a more conventional lawn. It's a versatile structure plant for prairie situations that only spreads very slowly.

Prairie planting on either side of a broad mown path. Planting of this height avoids the 'hemmed-in' feeling that you can sometimes get when using taller grasses and perennials.

