Native Plant Installation in the Northwoods

Some notes and guidelines for a native plant installation (in the Northwoods):

We are in a Northern Mixed Forest ecological region; woody plants are needed.

Grasses are important – sedges just as much. Warm season prairie grasses are good, but are much slower to fill in (at least up in this area) and slow to begin growth each spring.

FIRST Look at what's there. Check the existing vegetation and utilities. Are there trees or shrubs (shade/competition/difficult roots to plant through). Are there weeds to be removed or killed? Also check for nearby weedy areas that may spread seed. Consider removal options – usually just tilling things up will not suffice. Several chemical spray options exist – the best probably being Glyphosate (there are those that would object to this). Also smothering technique, but keep in mind that this takes an entire season of light and water exclusion in the Northwoods (more for some weeds). Turf grasses would be some of your worst weeds. A sod cutter is a great tool if the area is relatively level.

What is the aspect of the planting area? If it is on a slope that faces South, you will experience severe soil freeze-thaw cycles that are very hard on plants. Only some of our natives are well-adapted to this, so plant selection will be important. Mulching the planting will help, but not totally change the situation.

Obviously, soil type is important for plant selection.

Take into account slopes that will be drier and look for ponded areas that will be wetter.

Consider questions of access – both for the installer and for the landowner.

SECOND consider soil amendments, especially if incorporated pre-plant. Compost helps in ALL situations, so the biggest question is to plan quantities based on mixing it into the planting holes (not just dumping it in straight) or layering it on the surface and working it in. I almost always recommend the first option. Topsoil should almost never be brought into your site. It all has weeds in it that you will not want to deal with in your planting. Topsoil has value if you are making a lawn – but that is a different thing.

THEN CONSIDER plant selection and importantly the design or layout. Well-designed native plantings are always more successful than just throwing in a smattering of plants off of a native plant list. It is often good to group islands of trees/taller shrubs together (maybe off to the sides?) and other islands of shorter shrubs. Remember woody plants have their place. Grasses/sedges should often be planted in drifts or islands and not generally intermixed with the wildflowers. Some are actually clump forming, but many (even those that are supposedly "clump formers" like Little Bluestem) will spread and crowd out your wildflowers over time. Grasses in drifts/islands will allow for everyone to survive.

Spacing is quite dependent upon your knowledge of the species being used. However, as a rough guideline, we have actually found the NRCS standard densities to hold up well in our area. This is approximately 25 forbs/grasses, 3 shrubs and 0.5 tree per 100 SF area.

Species choices are based upon the landowners' objectives. But a good diversity of material not only is a great thing ecologically, but it spreads out the risk of whether or not you made good plant choices and protecting from future issues with a particular species due to a particular bug or disease nemesis that may pop up out of nowhere. Plant choices should probably be a combination of "matching " surrounding plant communities and adding "something new" (or re-introducing something that should actually have been there).

BEFORE PUTTING PLANTS IN THE GROUND consider any needs for erosion control blankets, sediment logs, trm's, and/or mulches. Mulches are great for conserving moisture and helping a little with weed control. It also creates an initial "clean look" that makes maintenance like week control easier. And everyone likes the look, of course. Two inches is plenty for most mulches. We highly recommend our native white cedar mulch that is brought in from nearby sustainable logging operations (U.P of Michigan). Things like generic wood chips, straw, and fallen leaves are often suggested – but are usually a mistake. They are ok under some circumstances – but check it out. Net-free excelsior blankets can take the place of cedar mulch and might be preferable if there are slopes (of 20% or steeper) being planted.

Temporary (or permanent) deer fencing is a must in most cases. We have guidelines if you are uncertain about how to proceed with this. Deer repellents are a distant second choice but are better than nothing if applied properly. There are almost no "deer proof" plants when herd numbers are high. It is ok to lean your selection toward deer resistant plants, but don't expect that alone to "save you". Some of the best deer resistant plants (like Diervilla) will not survive with no initial protection but will tolerate browsing quite well after being protected for say three years and being well established. Also, some great plants (like American cranberry viburnum) will be ok if protected (for say 7 years) when they are younger and shorter. Also remember that there are other critters (like rabbits) to consider at times.

Don't plant a thing if you don't have the ability to water it. In most cases some sort of irrigation system, from simple to professionally installed, will be required. Watering frequency is an art, but if you have to set a timer, do it based upon 1-inch of rainfall equivalent per week in summer (or for first two months whenever planted). On the shoulder months you will have to use a judgement factor. Overwatering can happen on all but the sharpest sands).

Years and years of horticultural research has proven the value of fertilizing for establishing new plants. However, it is not always recommended (or even allowed). Remember, compost is not fertilizer. I see value in organic fertilizers like Sustane root-feeder packs and Milorganite.

NOW-PLANT your chosen species. Forms can be potted, bare-root, live stakes, or seed. Potted (and some types of seed) are the only ones that can be installed from mid-May to mid-September (or maybe a bit beyond). The other forms have definite timing considerations.

Your best tool will be a good hand trowel and a drain spade. Seldom have I found the soils loose enough or well-worked enough to allow for use of a bulb planter or auger drill bit. Spreading seed can be with equipment designed for that – but I have always liked to mix the seed with Milorganite and just spread by hand. I divide the stuff into two equal halves and spread half going in one direction, and the other half walking across the area in the 90-degree direction from the first. In most cases native seeds are not buried after spreading. A light raking in to protect seed from birds, squirrels and mice may be necessary at times – as well as for some large native seeds.

MAINTENANCE IS CRITICAL. But this is a topic for another time. Besides, now that the plants are in the ground, watering (and perhaps applying repellents) will be the only concern for a few weeks.

SO MANY GOLDENRODS TO CHOOSE FROM! And all great for pollinators.

- Canada way too "invasive" (even if it is a native)
- Grass-leaf great for windy, somewhat dry shorelines
- Grey ditto, and can even go drier
- Showy lots of big blooms for late-season pollinators, somewhat aggressive
- Stiff most garden-like, and plays best in mixed plantings
- Zig-zag made in the shade
- Giant where height is desired, also somewhat aggressive
- Early earlier flowers for pollinators, or for bringing in yellow color in July
- Bog for wet (really wet) areas