A POCKET GUIDE TO
Central Kansas Wildflowers

SPRING-BLOOMING

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Introduction
Each spring, central Kansas rangelands are strewn with resplendent wildflowers set among vivid green grass, beckoning the spectator to traipse across the landscape for a closer look. This brief, non-technical guide is for the beginning enthusiast eager to explore the beauty and variety of native wildflowers.

Prairie plants can withstand the rigorous climatic growing conditions of central Kansas, including drought, high winds, and grazing by wildlife and livestock. These hardy plants can be found growing on rocky road cuts, high droughty plateaus, and in among thick, tall grasses. Wildflowers bloom at different times of the year, from March through frost, and many display interesting stems and seedheads even during the winter.

The native prairie ecosystem is unique and is rapidly disappearing. Most arable land has been plowed up for cropland. Development increasingly encroaches upon rangelands as large ranches are broken up into small homesites and urban sprawl spreads out from cities and towns. Prairie is too often seen as “empty land”, rather than as an environmentally sustainable factory producing not only meat, but also ecological and aesthetic services such as clean water, wildlife habitat, and open horizons.

Prairie health is maintained with grazing and with fire. Without these, an accumulation of litter begins to smother the plants. Trees,
brush, and other weeds are allowed to replace healthy prairie vegetation. Grasses die out, prairie plants and wildlife disappear, and eventually woody vegetation covers the landscape. Remediation is possible, but can be costly and time-consuming. Correct range management promotes healthy prairie with the use of sustainable stocking rates, periodic prescribed burns, and spot chemical treatment.

Choosing wildflowers for landscaping offers several benefits. Prairie plants generally need little water or fertilizer, are hardy, and withstand the hot, dry summers typical of Kansas. By choosing plants that bloom at different times of the year, a continuous display of color and form is possible.

Using native prairie plants also avoids the problem of accidentally introducing a non-native plant that may become a weed problem in rangeland. Some existing range weeds started as escapes from gardens. Transplanting existing plants from the prairie usually doesn’t work well, as their root systems are extremely difficult to excavate and the plant usually dies. Many wildflowers do well in gardens, and some plant centers routinely stock native plants and seeds.

This booklet is organized by flower color. Some flowers shade into another color and are difficult to categorize. For more complete guides, check the reference list at the back of the book.
“White” flowers may also be light pink, yellow, lavender, or blue due to natural variation.
New Jersey tea
*Ceanothus herbaceus* var. *pubescens*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** small shrub with hairy twigs; tiny black dots along the edges of the leaves; leaves have 3 veins

**Cool characteristic:** During the American Revolution, colonists used the leaves of this plant to make tea. Indians also made tea with the leaves.
Western marbleseed
*Onosmodium molle*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, roadsides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** small shrub with narrow, very hairy leaves; leaf undersides sometimes look white and green striped

**Cool characteristic:** Shiny hard, white, round seeds give this plant its name.
Baby white aster
*Chaetopappa ericoides*

**Where to find it:** roadsides, pastures, lawns, waste areas

**What to look for:** green alternating slender leaves; small, short plant

**Cool characteristic:** Southwest Native Americans used this plant medicinally to treat snakebites, nose ailments, toothaches, rheumatism, and swellings.
Spider antelopehorn
*Asclepias asperula*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, dry prairies

**What to look for:** milky sap; 3-6 in. pods with silky tufts of hair attached to seeds (typical milkweed seeds)

**Cool characteristic:** Seed pods resemble horns. Navajos used the sap to treat bites from rabid animals.
Yucca

Yucca glauca

Where to find it: rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

What to look for: stiff, leathery, sharp-pointed leaves arising from a central base; tall (1-3 ft.) flower stalks

Cool characteristics: Petals are edible and can be used in salads. Leaf fibers were used by Hopi for basket weaving. Many tribes used the roots to make a soap.
Prairie larkspur
*Delphinium carolinianum*

**Where to find it:** prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** flowers can also be pale blue; stems can be fuzzy; leaves deeply divided into narrow lobes; spur (conical flower part) on backside of flower

**Cool characteristic:** All parts of the plant are toxic. Eating this plant impairs the nervous system and leads to respiratory failure.
Cobea beardtongue
*Penstemon cobea*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** leaves opposite each other along the stem; flowers grow from where the upper leaves attach to the stem; red-purple lines inside the flower

**Cool characteristics:** Inside the flower is a fuzzy plant part (stamen) that gives this plant its name (beardtongue).
Tube penstemon
*Penstemon tubaeﬂorus*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** much like cobea beard-tongue except no red-purple lines inside the flower

**Cool characteristics:** Inside the flower is a fuzzy plant part (stamen) with yellow hairs. Petals form a tube-like structure at their base.
Daisy fleabane

*Erigeron strigosus* var. *strigosus*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides; non-native

**What to look for:** many small (1 in. or less in diameter) flowers on each plant; few, narrow leaves

**Cool characteristics:** While common in many prairies, dense stands of this plant can result from livestock overgrazing.
Showy eveningprimrose
*Oenothera speciosa*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** flowers may also be light pink; flowers always have 4 petals; flowers that are done blooming look pink as they close

**Cool characteristics:** Flowers close during the heat of the day, reopening in the evening.
White pricklypoppy

*Argemone polyanthemos*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** spiny, waxy leaves and stem; blue-green leaf color

**Cool characteristics:** The yellow-orange sap of this plant was used by the Dakota to dye arrows.
Red, Orange and Yellow Flowers
Indianblanket  
*Gaillardia pulchella*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, sandy soils

**What to look for:** upright plant with hairy stem and leaves; knobby round seedheads

**Cool characteristic:** Kiowa thought this plant would bring good luck.
Scarlet globemallow
*Sphaeralcea coccinea*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** silver-gray hairy leaves with many lobes; lies along the ground

**Cool characteristic:** The tuberous root (like a skinny potato) of this plant was used by the Navajo as an emergency food supply.
Butterfly milkweed  
*Asclepias tuberosa*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** many tiny flowerlets at the ends of stems; bushy plant; flower color varies from yellow through orange to red; no milky sap like other milkweeds

**Cool characteristics:** This plant is very attractive to butterflies which are frequently seen alighting on the flowers.
Fremont’s eveningprimrose
*Oenothera macrocarpa* ssp. *fremontii*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings

**What to look for:** flowers that are done blooming look orange as they close; lies along the ground; always has 4 petals; seedhead has 4 “wings”

**Cool characteristic:** This plant is found only in Kansas and Nebraska.
Grooved flax
*Linum sulcatum*

**Where to find it:** prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** flowers have 5 petals; petals fall off very easily, but sepals remain on the plant; usually several flowers/stalk

**Cool characteristic:** The leaves and seeds of this plant are very toxic, especially to sheep.
Western wallflower

*Erysimum capitatum* var. *capitatum*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** flowers have 4 petals; thin, narrow leaves; long, skinny seed pods

**Cool characteristic:** Great Plains Indian tribes used the seeds to make a medicinal tea for stomach cramps.
Prairie coneflower
*Ratibida columnifera*

*Where to find it:* rocky outcroppings, roadsides, prairie hillsides

*What to look for:* lines of stiff hairs along the stem; leaves are divided into many thin narrow leaflets

*Cool characteristic:* Cheyenne used various parts of this plant to treat many different ailments, including rattlesnake bites.
Pink Flowers
Prairie rose
*Rosa arkansana*

*Where to find it:* rocky outcroppings, roadsides, prairie hillsides

*What to look for:* small oval leaves with toothed margins, small prickly thorns, red round fruits (rose hips).

*Cool characteristic:* Rose hips can be eaten raw or stewed into a vitamin-C rich tea.
Cat-claw sensitivebrier
*Mimosa nuttallii*

Where to find it: rocky outcroppings, roadsides, prairie hillsides

What to look for: small, delicate leaflets; round knobby seedheads; small curved thorns along the stem

Cool characteristic: The leaflets fold closed when lightly touched.
Downy paintbrush
*Castilleja sessiliflora*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, roadsides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** white to pinkish bracts around inconspicuous flowers

**Cool characteristic:** Downy paintbrush is parasitic on other plants. Other species of paintbrush range in color from red to yellow.
Blue and Purple Flowers
Dakota verbena
*Glandularia bipinnatifida*

Where to find it: rocky outcroppings, roadsides, prairie hillsides

What to look for: leaves with deep lobes; frequently lies along the ground

Cool characteristic: Garden verbenas have been hybridized from this plant.
Spiderwort
*Tradescantia ohiensis*

**Where to find it:** moist depressions in the prairie, places where water stands longer

**What to look for:** waxy, long, grass-like leaves

**Cool characteristic:** Sometimes called cow slobbers for the slime in the stems.
Slim-flowered scurfpea
Psoralea tenuiflora

Where to find it: prairie hillsides

What to look for: slightly shiny leaves in bunches of 5; looks somewhat like alfalfa; seed pods have tiny pits on them

Cool characteristic: Lakota burned the plant to ward off mosquitoes.
Chinese lantern
*Quincula lobata*

Where to find it: roadsides, sunny prairies, waste areas, gravelly soils

What to look for: mat-like growth form; many leaves; pods that looks like little lanterns

Cool characteristic: Native Americans made jelly from the little berries inside the lanterns.
Woolly locoweed
*Astragalus mollissimus*

*Where to find it:* prairie hillsides, rocky outcroppings

*What to look for:* woolly oval-shaped leaflets, sprawling plant

*Cool characteristics:* Highly poisonous plant to livestock, especially horses, causing them to become skittish or “loco”.
Purple poppymallow
*Callirhoe involucrata*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** frequently lies along the ground; leaves deeply lobed; kidney-shaped seed pods

**Cool characteristic:** The root of this plant is tuberous (like a potato) and can be eaten raw or fried.
Resinous skullcap
*Scutellaria resinosa*

Where to find it: rocky outcroppings, roadsides, prairie hillsides

What to look for: very short plant only a few inches tall; many stiff stems; hairy leaves arranged opposite of each other

Cool characteristic: This plant thrives on very rocky, steep hillsides and is not found in eastern Kansas.
Purple prairieclover
*Dalea purpurea*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** very thin, narrow leaflets arranged in bunches of 3-5; stands nearly straight up; usually multiple flower heads

**Cool characteristic:** Because livestock eat this plant in preference to many of the other range plants, it isn’t found where there is severe overgrazing.
Leadplant

*Amorpha canescens*

**Where to find it:** rocky outcroppings, road-sides, prairie hillsides

**What to look for:** silver-gray hairy leaves that are soft to the touch; many numerous leaflets; usually 1-3 ft. tall

**Cool characteristic:** Like other legumes, this plant collects nitrogen from the air and stores it in its root nodules. Nitrogen is an essential nutrient for plant growth.
Grasses and Sedges
Big bluestem
*Andropogon gerardii*

**Where to find it:** prairies, plains, dry soils, and open woods

**What to look for:** finger-like seedheads like a turkey-foot; lower stems purplish, flat, and hairy

**Cool characteristics:** This grass provides high quality forage for livestock and wildlife eat the seeds. The Chippewa used the roots for stomach pain.
Little bluestem
Schizachyrium scoparium

Where to find it: Prairies, dry hills, open woods, and sand hills

What to look for: lower stems are bluish green to purplish and waxy; mature seed-head has zigzag form; turns red to orange after frost; flat lower stems

Cool characteristic: This grass is highly palatable for livestock and wildlife.
Indiangrass
*Sorghastrum nutans*

**Where to find it:** bottomlands, prairies, open woods, deep moist soils

**What to look for:** yellow to gold seed-head with long bent awns

**Cool characteristic:** At the base of the leaf blade there are prominent rabbit-ear lobes.
Switchgrass
*Panicum virgatum*

**Where to find it:** bottomlands, prairies, open woods

**What to look for:** seedheads feathery and pyramid shaped; triangular patch of hair on the upper surface of the leaf base

**Cool characteristic:** Switchgrass is being investigated for its potential as a biofuel.
Tall dropseed
*Sporobolum compositus*

**Where to find it:** prairies and plains on dry soils

**What to look for:** stem partially enclosed within the leaf; long, thin leaves flat or rolled inward and taper to points at the ends (like threads)

**Cool characteristic:** This grass has only fair forage value but is drought tolerant.
Sideoats grama  
*Bouteloua curtipendula*

**Where to find it:** open prairies and rocky hillsides; found on limestone or chalk soils

**What to look for:** seeds hang at an angle on one side of the stalk

**Cool characteristic:** This plant is the state grass of Texas. Flowers are bright orange.
Blue grama
*Bouteloua gracilis*

**Where to find it:** dry, sandy, gravelly soils and open plains

**What to look for:** seeds are arranged like bristles on a toothbrush; leaves are mostly basal (near the ground)

**Cool characteristic:** Blue grama is a highly palatable grass for livestock that is drought tolerant.
Buffalograss
*Buchloe dactyloides*

**Where to find it:** in high light areas on open plains and on well drained clay soils

**What to look for:** orange-red seeds arranged like bristles on a toothbrush (female plants); tan bur-like seeds down among the leaves (male); hairy leaves

**Cool characteristic:** The small bur-like seed clusters are thought to resemble the head of a bison (buffalo).
Western wheatgrass
*Pascopyrum smithii*

**Where to find it:** prairies and disturbed areas with dry soils

**What to look for:** leaves roll inward when drought-stressed; prominent veins feel like ridges when scraped with a fingernail; blue-green color

**Cool characteristic:** Good-quality hay can be made from this plant when it is cut in the late-bloom stage.
Purple threeawn  
*Arizida purpurea*

**Where to find it:** dry hills, plains, and disturbed sites

**What to look for:** 3 purplish equal-length awns (long thin points on seeds); tufts of hair on both sides of the leaf near the base

**Cool characteristic:** An undesirable plant, threeawn can cause eye, nose, and mouth injuries in livestock.
Scribner’s panicum  
*Dichanthelium oligosanthes var. scribnerianum*

**Where to find it:** open prairies, meadows, and disturbed grounds; sandy to gravelly limestone soils

**What to look for:** a few hairs on the leaves and stems; leaves broad and fairly short; round seeds just above top leaves

**Cool characteristic:** Scribner’s panicum was named for Frank L. Scribner, a grass specialist for the USDA.
Smooth brome
*Bromus inermis*

**Where to find it:** disturbed areas, pastures, roadsides, and hay fields; sandy-loam or clayey-loam soils; non-native

**What to look for:** leaves with a W constriction on the blades near the tip; prominent veins in leaves; often on roadsides

**Cool characteristic:** Smooth brome was introduced in the 1880’s and is widely planted for grazing and hay.
Sedge ssp.  
*Cyperaceae*

**Where to find it:** moist or dry soils; prairies and open lands

**What to look for:** triangular stem has "edges" (not round)

**Cool characteristic:** Carex (genus name) comes from the greek word keirein which means "to cut".
Information Sources

Information for this booklet was obtained from the following sources:

Books:


Websites:
Kansas Wildflowers and Grasses
http://www.kswildflower.org/

Kansas Grasses
http://spuds.agron.ksu.edu/

USDA-NRCS Plants Database
http://plants.usda.gov/

Native American Ethnobotany
http://herb.umd.umich.edu/

Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center
http://www.wildflower.org

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http://www.missouriplants.com/
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