BACKYARD RESTORATION ON THE PALOUSE

A Guide to Restoring Native Palouse Prairie in Your Yard



Palouse Conservation District works through voluntary, incentive-based programs to assist land managers and agricultural operators with the conservation of natural resources throughout the Palouse River Watershed, with a primary focus within district boundaries.

PCD's mission is to foster the voluntary conservation of natural resources by providing the tools, education, technical expertise, and financial assistance to support our local community.

Cover photo: Elisabeth Brackney

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This publication serves as a guide for advancing conservation goals and projects.

Strategies may vary based on resource concerns and site location.

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Acknowledgments

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Idaho Native Plant Society, White Pine Chapter
Latah Soil and Water Conservation District
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Whitman County Noxious Weed Control Board

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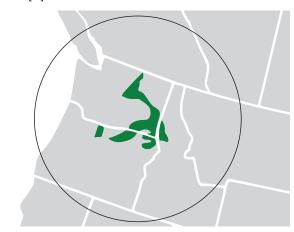
Palouse Prairie remnant with Arrowleaf Balsamroot (Balsamorhiza sagittata) found at Whelan Cemetery
Photo by Ivy Woltering

The deep, fertile soils of the Palouse that support today's vast agricultural fields were once home to a sprawling prairie of bunchgrass and wildflowers, with small patches of shrubs and trees. Today less than 1% of native Palouse Prairie habitat remains, fragmented into tiny pockets where it was historically too steep or rocky to farm [1]. This makes it one of the most endangered ecosystems in the United States [2].

The majority of Palouse Prairie remnants are located on private property [1], but some publicly accessible native prairies remain, including the south overlook of Kamiak Butte County Park, Steptoe Butte State Park, and the historic Whelan Cemetery.

Another way to experience a well-preserved remnant is to contact the Palouse Land Trust to schedule a private tour of the Dave Skinner Ecological Preserve near Moscow, Idaho.

Several local organizations and dedicated individuals have worked hard to conserve, restore, and raise awareness for what little is left of this unique ecosystem. The Palouse Prairie Foundation was founded in 2004 to promote



Historic range of the Palouse Prairie ecoregion

preservation and restoration activities, with its website serving as a hub to connect Palouse Prairie enthusiasts with resources and informational opportunities. Direct restoration projects have been implemented by the Latah Soil & Water Conservation District, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Latah County Field Office, and The Phoenix Conservancy, while Eastern Washington University is working to restore 120 acres of campus property to its native Palouse habitat. Several private landowners have dedicated countless hours and resources to restoring remnants, receiving some financial assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or USDA, or financing from their own pocket.



The USDA NRCS Plant Materials Center in Pullman, Washington published a series of technical resources on restoration techniques and strategies to assist land managers in restoring native prairie. Additionally, the Palouse Land Trust collaborates with landowners to help permanently conserve these rare ecosystems for the enjoyment of generations to come.

Douglas' brodiaea (Triteleia grandiflora)

Think you may already own a Palouse Prairie remnant? Consider preserving it for the next generation by setting restrictions on future development. Contact the Palouse Land Trust for options.

Why Plant Native?

They may be small, but backyard remnants can pack a big punch!

Native species can be planted to restore Palouse Prairie patches in backyards and small acreages. This promotes connectivity between habitat patches for insects, birds, and small mammals that need it.

Native plants are plants that occur naturally and historically within a region. They are the ecological foundation that native wildlife depend upon for survival.

In addition to adding habitat value, native species are specifically adapted to our region and growing conditions. As a result, these native species are hardier, lower-maintenance, and more drought-tolerant than non-native plantings. Their deep root systems serve to reduce erosion and store carbon below ground.



Bumblebee on Palouse thistle (Cirsium brevifolium)

Benefits of Native Plants

Enhanced biodiversity · Support for pollinators

Carbon storage · Beauty · Water conservation · Erosion control

Low maintenance or fertilizer needed

Five Steps to Get Started















Palouse Conservation District staff conduct maintenance on a native plant demonstration garden

CONSIDER YOUR GOALS

Looking to complete a full prairie restoration? Interested in attracting pollinators or other wildlife? Aiming to reduce erosion or simply add a few natives to the landscape? Designing for a natural look or a more manicured look? Answers to these questions will help guide your project. Be careful not to take on too much at one time. Once you have a small area established, consider slowly expanding it outwards in the following years.

GET TO KNOW THE SITE

Consider sunlight, topography, soil, moisture, and current vegetation. Try to observe the space at multiple points throughout the day and across the seasons to account for sunlight shift. Keep in mind that most native prairie species prefer full-sun conditions of six or more hours of sunlight per day. Whenever possible, target the area of the property that gets the most sunlight. South facing slopes can be a good place to start as they tend to be more exposed.

Determining site conditions ahead of time will help select the best species to meet your goals.

It takes time to build and nurture an understanding of the landscape. Getting to know your site will help you make more informed decisions throughout your planting process. Be patient and keep in mind that every restoration project is unique.

Key Questions

- Where in the site is the sun always shining? Where is it shady? Partly shady?
- Is it drier in some areas and wetter in others?
- Is the site on a slope? Which direction is it facing?
- Are there lower lying areas?
 These likely retain more moisture.
- What is growing? Turf grass, trees, invasive or noxious weeds, annuals, perennials?
- How many square feet is the site?



It's important to properly prepare the site before planting. Preparations may include removing a portion of lawn and managing weeds. These can be done with or without the use of synthetic chemicals.

Be sure to identify each potential weed species on the site before trying to control them as different species will require different control methods. For instance, hand pulling will work for some weed species, but for others it will only lead to a larger infestation.



Before diving headfirst into any weed or lawn removal method, mow the area down to the shortest height possible. Try to target weed removal at the beginning of the season when weeds are naturally at their smallest and weakest [5].

While the quickest way to prepare the site for planting will typically be through the careful application of herbicides, alternative methods also exist that can be applied alone or in conjunction with herbicide application. Whatever methods applied, keep in mind that it's unlikely all weeds will be successfully removed. Be prepared to fight particularly persistent weeds for multiple growing seasons.

A remnant prairie patch at Steptoe Butte

Recommended Weed Resources

You can consult your local County Weed Board to determine the best ways to control weeds on your site. The Washington State University Extension publication *Invasive Weeds of Eastern Washington* is a valuable resource for identifying and managing weed species. It can be found and downloaded for free from the online WSU Extension Publications store.

If you're having trouble identifying a weed, check out the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board's online Weed Search tool at www.nwcb.wa.gov.



Herbicide-Free Methods

MANUAL REMOVAL

Rent a sod cutter or hire a local landscaping company to cut the sod. Once the sod is removed, follow up with another weed control method as weed seeds that were previously too deep to germinate may now be exposed.

Some weed species respond well to hand-pulling, hoeing, or digging. However, some weeds require complete root removal, and manual removal methods could make these infestations more aggressive. Be sure to accurately identify the weed in question before trying to manually remove it.

SHEET MULCHING

Over the course of a few months, use layers of cardboard, newspaper, and bark mulch to smother weeds and lawns. These materials will eventually decompose, but can also be planted into as needed. Cotton and burlap may also be used but will take longer to fully decompose.

SOLARIZATION

Place a plastic sheet over the area to kill both lawn grasses and weeds, including weed seeds waiting to germinate. Many sources recommend using clear plastic over the course of a few weeks at the height of summer, but local experts have found that black plastic left on for one to two full growing seasons may be more effective in our climate. Don't be afraid to experiment and find what works. The plastic is intended to be removed before you begin planting.

WEED MATTING

Plastic landscape fabric or weed matting is available for purchase at local landscaping and hardware stores. Weeds are suppressed in a similar fashion to solarization; however, weed matting is woven to allow for water and air flow and is intended to stay on for multiple years. Plant directly into the fabric by cutting small holes and plan to remove it within a few years of installation.

Herbicide Methods

When applying herbicides either alone or in conjunction with non-chemical methods always keep in mind "the label is the law" [5]. It is important to carefully read and follow the label.

Look for safety, storage, and restriction information, and be sure to thoroughly read all application instructions. Herbicide applicators may be held liable for any damages caused by the use of the herbicide.

Limit use of herbicides whenever possible to reduce the risk of ecological harm to insects, including pollinators, as well as to slow the onset of herbicide resistance. Carefully target only plants of concern to avoid drift (accidental spraying of surrounding plants).

For more information on which herbicides to choose and how to properly apply them, contact your local County Weed Board or university extension office.

Non-Selective Herbicides Indiscriminate, targeting any plant they come into contact with.

Selective Herbicides

Target only specific types of plants without harming others. For example, broadleaf herbicides are not effective against grasses.

Identify the targeted weed before choosing an herbicide.

Common Weeds & Control Options



Target young seedlings. Hand pull or dig when soil is moist. Revegetate area promptly. Mow to reduce seed.



Hand-pull, cut below root crown. Mow if flowering to eliminate seed production. Revegetate area promptly.



Resistant to some herbicides. Hand-pull/dig when soil is moist. Mow to prevent seed production.

Unless identification

confirmed, consult an expert. There are some uncommon

beneficial native thistles

that should be protected.

of a thistle can be



Don't leave cut vines to re-root. Sheet mulch area after clearing.



Hand-pull, dig, or hoe. Mow over multiple seasons. Wear gloves when handling. Revegetate area promptly.



Increase competition in area. Mow before flowering to prevent seed set. Hand-pull for 6-10 years; remove roots.



Hand-pull when soil is moist. Mow/cut before flowering; remove all leaves. Bag cut flowers.



Never pull! Bag stems if cut. Heavily sheet mulch & solarize. Keep it continually stressed.



Increase competition in area. Mow repeatedly before seed set. Hand-pull and be sure to remove root fragments.



Hand-pull, hoe, or rototill. Bag & remove from site. May set seed even after cut/pulled.



Keep it continually stressed. Increase competition in area. Install weed fabric & sheet mulch. Mow repeatedly.

RAIRIE GUIDE AG

Weeds, cont.



Sever 3-4" below root crown in autumn. Pull vines away from other plants. Grows back quickly from root.



Hand-pull, dig, hoe, or rototill.



Hand-pull, dig, hoe, rototill, or mow before seed production; difficult to remove after seed production.



Hand-pull prior to seed set. Resistant to some herbicides.



Hand-pull, dig, hoe, or rototill. Revegetate area promptly to create competition.



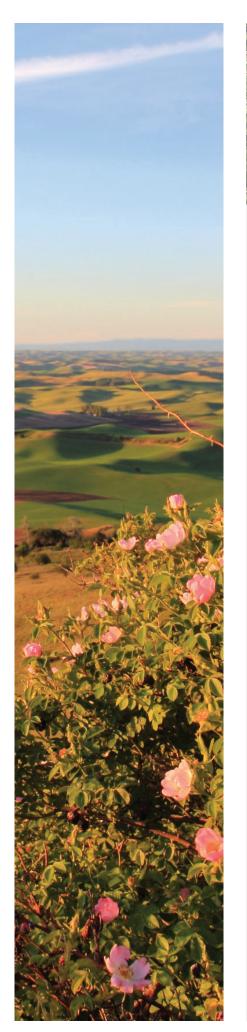
Hand-pull when soil is moist. Mow before seed heading to prevent tangling in equipment.



Careful application of herbicides can be used to manage weeds



Hand pulling is a non-chemical method recommended for some, but not all, weed species

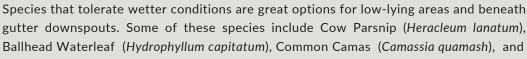


INVASIVE ANNUAL GRASSES

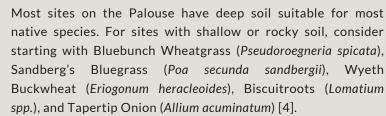


When choosing which native species to plant, pay attention to each species' preferred site conditions. Most native prairie species prefer dry sites with full sun; however, there are some that do well under shade or in wetter areas. Consider individual conservation goals for the property. Some species are better than others at attracting wildlife, hosting pollinators, stabilizing soil, or providing windbreaks.

Full-sun loving species will do well on exposed, south facing slopes. Flat areas with exposure to 6+ hours of sunlight are also good choices. When choosing plants, keep in mind that north facing slopes tend to be shadier and hold more moisture than south facing slopes.



Western Iris (Iris missouriensis).



Try to familiarize yourself with native species during all stages of growth before planting them in highly visible areas. Some plants may appear very beautiful at one stage but lack aesthetic attributes throughout the life cycle.

Lupine (Lupinus spp.)



Yarrow (Achillea millefolium



Western mountain aster (Symphyotrichum spathulatum)



Blanketflower



Arrowleaf Balsamroot

As the climate continues to change, our area is expected to get hotter and drier. It may make sense to choose species that are well-adapted to these conditions. Alternatively, it may make sense to choose a broad range of species with variable climate tolerances, which may boost biodiversity and the chances that something will be able to adapt to the site in a changing future. Again, don't be afraid to experiment to see what works.

Planting a diverse mix of species will also encourage resilience to herbivory and stress. The more species planted, the greater likelihood of survival.

Recommended Species





Shrubs Blue Elderberry Sambucus nigra subsp. cerulea Oregon Grape Mahonia aquifolium, Mahonia repens Douglas Spirea Spiraea douglasii Golden Currant Ribes aureum Snowberry Symphoricarpos albus Western Serviceberry Amelanchier alnifolia Woods' Rose, Nootka Rose Rosa woodsii, Rosa nutkana







Edible Plant
Edible berries, roots, and/or leaves

This is not an exhaustive list.

Don't hesitate to experiment with different species to find what works for you and your site!



Whelan Cemetery in June

Only source plants and seeds labeled for **Eastern Washington**, **Northern Idaho**, or the **Columbia Basin**. These plants and seeds will be locally adapted to this region. An online search for "wildflower seeds" or "native seeds" will likely show items that are not native to this specific ecoregion, and may contain species that are invasive to this area. Even a plant that is native to North America or the United States is not necessarily native here and may still outcompete local Palouse natives.

Plugs & Containerized Plants		
Benefits	Drawbacks	
Weed suppression Less time with exposed ground	More expensive	
Quicker establishment Results in current season	Limited by nursery stock	
Manicured / intentional aesthetic	Some species don't transplant well	
More control over placement	Labor may be more tiresome	

Seeds		
Benefits	Drawbacks	
Cheaper	Slower establishment 3+ years depending on species	
Easier / quicker initial labor	Cannot use sheet mulch method	
Natural aesthetic	Less control over placement	
Grass seeds don't need stratification	Forb seeds need stratification	

Select taller containers when buying container stock or plugs, as the root systems will be healthier and the added length will help the plant's roots grow deeper than those of surrounding weeds. Thinner and taller plugs are typically more economical, and they can better accommodate native roots than traditional one-gallon or four- to six-inch pots.

Can't decide between seeds and plugs? Why not try both? Seeds can be propagated to transplant at a later date.

SEED AND PLANT SOURCES At publication

- Clearwater Seed Spokane, WA
- Grassland Northwest LLC Clarkston, WA
- John Crock Learning Nursery, Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute Moscow, ID
- White Pine Chapter Native Plant Sale, Idaho Native Plant Society Moscow, ID
- Palouse Conservation District Plant Sale Pullman, WA
- Plants of the Wild Tekoa, WA
- Rose Creek Seed Pullman, WA
- Westland Seed Inc. Ronan, MT

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Seed Collection

Exercise caution when collecting native seeds and keep in mind that permits and permission may be required. Please collect responsibly.

While it may be tempting to think that the seeds are better off with you, remember that you are not the only one who may need them. Healthy native plant communities depend on their seeds germinating close by in order to successfully compete with invasive species. Various wildlife species, from insects to mammals to birds, may rely on those seeds being available for their survival.

Unless collecting from personal plantings, try to adhere to the following protocols:

- Never take seeds if there are fewer than fifty individuals of that species in the area, and only take from one out of every twenty individual plants [4].
- Take only a small portion (no more than five percent) of the seeds from any individual plant.
- Don't collect from rare plants, including Spalding's catchfly (Silene spaldingii), Palouse goldenweed (Haplopappus liatriformis), Jessica's aster (Aster jessicae), Palouse thistle (Cirsium brevifolium), Broad-fruit mariposa (Calochortus nitidus), and Palouse milkvetch (Astragalus arrectus) [4].



Federally-threatened Spalding's catchfly (Silene spaldingii)

After collection, seeds will need to be cleaned and prepared for planting. Place them in paper bags or cardboard boxes to encourage airflow, and allow them to dry for about a week. Some native seeds "slingshot" themselves away from the plant as they dry; those species will benefit from having a lid over their seeds.

Additionally, some native seeds suffer from heavy insect damage, so it may be beneficial to treat them with insecticide as they dry. This can be done by placing the drying seed bags or boxes and insecticide together in a sealed container or bin.

Seed Characteristics of Some Native Species, a publication developed by David Skinner at the USDA-NRCS Pullman Plant Materials Center, provides a guide to seed collection and preparation. Access it online through the Palouse Prairie Foundation's publication library.



Step 4: Planting & Seeding

Timing is the most important consideration when planting and seeding native species.

This is to ensure that plants have enough moisture to germinate and get established.

	Spring	Seed Grasses April 1 - May 10 Plant Plugs April 15 - May 15	Keep seeds and plugs moist during the first few weeks, reducing water once established. Non-grass seeds require stratification before seeding.		
	Fall (early season)	Seed Before Mid-September Plant Plugs Before Mid-September	Keep seeds and plugs moist. Ensure enough time to establish before frost. Can be risky for seedlings. Plugs need at least 30 days of growth before frost.		
	Fall (dormant - late season)	Seed October 20 - November 10 After soil temperature decreases to 40°F	Ensures seeds will not germinate until spring, reducing the risk of frost killing young seedlings. No need to stratify before seeding.		
	Winter	Seed When 2+ months of 40°F soil remain Plant Plugs When ground is not frozen	Ensure that snowfall is expected to protect seeds from predators and wind. No need to stratify before seeding. Plugs will remain dormant.		
18 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1	Summer	Avoid this time of year	Planting and seeding is still possible, but will require manual seed stratification and significantly more water.		
	Dig Hole	Measure Depth Remove I	Pot Fill & Mulch Water In		

Plugs/Containers: Dig a hole wide and deep enough that there are no air pockets once filled in. The new soil should reach the soil level of the plug without mounding. The final surface should be flat or slightly concave to allow for moisture accumulation. Water the plant in deeply to further remove any air pockets.

Seeds: Create a seed bed with variations in the surface to provide micro-sites, and cover with a light dusting of soil to ensure good seed-to-soil contact. The seed should be no more than a quarter inch below the surface.

Seeding & Planting Tips

SEED PREP

Unlike native grasses, many native wildflower species require a cool, moist stratification period to stimulate germination. This can be done naturally by seeding in late fall or early winter for spring germination. It can also be done manually in the fridge. On average, native seeds require cool, moist stratification for sixty days.

Did you know?

Old advice said to establish native

grasses before flowers to allow for

broadleaf herbicide application during

the first few seasons. However, this

method may make it difficult for flowers

to establish as they compete with the

older, more robust grasses.

The most current advice from local

experts? Plant your native grasses and

flowers at the same time.

There are a few ways to accomplish manual stratification, and they're all easily searchable online. Methods include wrapping seeds in moist paper towels or mixing them with moist soil before placing them in the fridge. By stratifying seeds manually, you have more options for when to sow the seeds and you can start them in pots before planting if desired.

Inoculate lupine seeds with rhizobia bacteria to help them get established.

These bacteria form a symbiotic relationship with the plant to fix nitrogen.

SEEDING

Seed heavily when broadcast seeding as some seeds will be lost to erosion and predation. Aim for one hundred seeds per square foot, similar to seeding a new lawn. Cover seeds with a weed-free straw mulch to protect them from being eaten or blown away.

PLANTING

Trees and shrubs can be acquired as dormant 'bare roots'. These require careful planting to eliminate any air pockets and ensure roots are correctly oriented downward. Bare roots should be planted promptly before they break dormancy.

Plant species in clumps of three to seven plants. Planting in small groups of like species creates an intentional aesthetic and may attract more pollinators, such as our native ground- and cavity-nesting solitary bees. For a manicured look, use plugs and plant further apart. Follow up with a heavy layer of mulch. For a natural look, use more seeds and plant plugs closer together. In general, planting closer together limits available space for weeds.

Exposed ground is easily colonized by weeds, so add mulch when possible. Lightly mulch around the base of plugs with a weed-free bark mulch to retain soil moisture and suppress weeds. One caveat of mulch application is that many native bees are ground nesters. Consider leaving small patches of bare ground untouched for native bee habitat.

FERTILIZER

Don't feed the weeds! Fertilizer is unnecessary for native plants and will likely only cause more weed problems. Local plants are adapted to the Palouse's natural soil and nutrient levels.



Step 5: Establishment & Maintenance

Although native plants are well adapted to local growing conditions, they still require some maintenance, especially while establishing roots. Palouse Prairie natives take a few years to establish - don't lose hope if you are not seeing the results you were hoping for during the first few years after installation.



Blanketflower (Gaillardia aristata) during year one of planting

Perennial Palouse Prairie natives will spend their first year focusing on root growth. During this period, they may be difficult to spot above ground. You should keep a record or place flags where you have planted and replace damaged or lost flags as needed. You can expect these species to take off within a couple of

During the first few years after planting it is important to control weeds (never let them go to seed) and replant desired species as necessary. Take a photo from the same location at least once a year during the growing season to document your site's progress.

Watering is crucial during establishment - don't let the seed bed or planting area completely dry out in the first few weeks. Later on, watering may only be necessary during drought periods, if at all.

Monitor plant health, including signs of insect damage and other excessive herbivory. If rodent herbivory is an issue, increase the rate of grass seeding and consider adding raptor perch poles to the site. Watch out for plants outgrowing weed matting or tree tubes.



Wyeth buckwheat (Eriogonum heracleoides) during year one of planting



A native plant garden established at the PCD office, year three



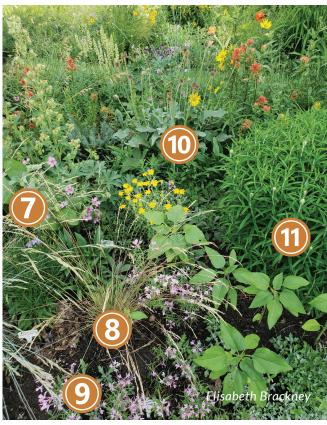
Missouri goldenrod (Solidago missouriensis) during year one of planting

Continue regular weed maintenance at the site. Seed any newly exposed bare ground early to discourage invasive species from establishing. To support native cavity nesting bees, consider leaving dead stems standing at the end of the season or dedicate a space to gather dead stems.

First year they sleep, second year they creep, third year they leap!

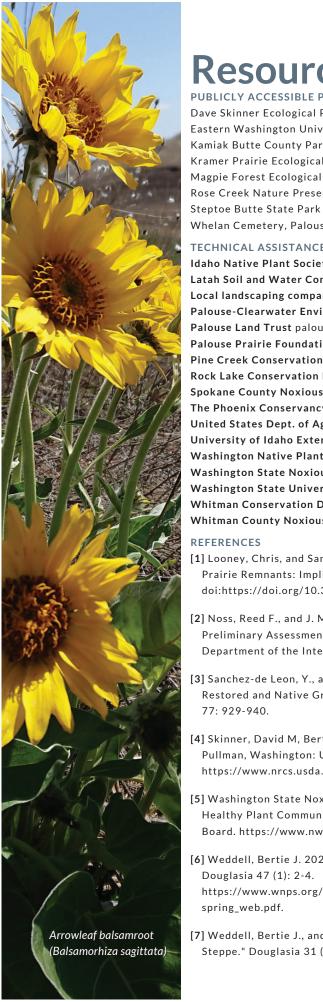
Example Photos







- 1. Little sunflower Helianthella uniflora
- 2. Oregon sunshine Eriophyllum lanatum
- 3. Wyeth buckwheat Eriogonum heracleoides
- 4. Fireweed Epilobium angustifolium
- 5. Harsh paintbrush Castilleja hispida
- 6. Alumroot Heuchera cylindrica
- 7. Sticky purple geranium Geranium viscosissimum
- 8. Sandberg bluegrass Poa secunda
- 9. Deerhorn clarkia Clarkia pulchella
- 10. Arrowleaf balsamroot Balsamorhiza sagittata
- 11. Pearly everlasting Anaphalis margaritacea



Resources

PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE PRAIRIE LOCATIONS

Dave Skinner Ecological Preserve, Palouse Land Trust Eastern Washington University Prairie Restoration Project Kamiak Butte County Park, Managed Whitman County Parks Kramer Prairie Ecological Reserve, Washington State University Magpie Forest Ecological Reserve, Washington State University Rose Creek Nature Preserve, Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute

Whelan Cemetery, Palouse Prairie Foundation

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Idaho Native Plant Society, White Pine Chapter whitepineinps.org Latah Soil and Water Conservation District latahswcd.org

Local landscaping companies

Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute pcei.org

Palouse Land Trust palouselandtrust.org

Palouse Prairie Foundation palouseprairie.org

Pine Creek Conservation District pinecreekcd.org

Rock Lake Conservation District rocklakecd.org

Spokane County Noxious Weed Control Board spokanecounty.org/1095/Noxious-Weed-Control

The Phoenix Conservancy phoenix conservancy.org

United States Dept. of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service nrcs.usda.gov

University of Idaho Extension, Latah County uidaho.edu/extension/county/latah

Washington Native Plant Society wnps.org

Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board nwcb.wa.gov

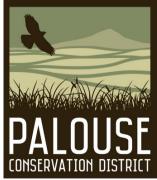
Washington State University Extension, Whitman County extension.wsu.edu/whitman

Whitman Conservation District whitmancd.org

Whitman County Noxious Weed Control Board whitmancounty.org/329/Weed-Control

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- https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/Palouse%20Prairie%20Restoration.pdf.
- [5] Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board. n.d. Full Circle: Control Noxious Weeds, Grow Healthy Plant Communities, Support Bees and Other Pollinators. WA State Noxious Weed Control Board. https://www.nwcb.wa.gov/pdfs/Full_Circle_booklet.pdf.
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