



CLEAN Community Challenge Success Story:

## Prairie Plantings Project Noblesville, Indiana



### **Background**

Noblesville's CLEAN stakeholder committee selected this prairie plantings initiative as one of their five CLEAN goals. Although native plantings can be a very effective tool in storm water management, Noblesville faced the challenge of negative perceptions of city employees and the public. The CLEAN stakeholder committee wanted an opportunity to change those internal and external perceptions that native plants are unsightly. Property in the flood plain at Noblesville Wastewater Utility was determined to be an ideal location to achieve that objective, since the city was using resources to mow and maintain an area that did not need to be kept as manicured lawn.

### **Goal**

Create low impact in design and implementation of native prairie plantings behind Noblesville Wastewater Utility, improving water quality, reducing mowing, reducing fuel use, and enhancing wildlife habitat.

### **Action Plan and Tasks Completed**

- Create plan and timeline for prairie plantings
- Design planting area and gather quotes
- Select contractor
- Prepare ground and begin planting
- Monitor plantings and perform necessary maintenance
- Future plans call for a nature trail to be extended near the site and public education signage to be placed about the prairie plantings

### **Accomplishments**

Noblesville chose 8.5 acres located in the flood plain at the Noblesville Wastewater Utility as their target area. Planting was completed in May of 2013. The city hired a consulting firm to do the initial work of planting and maintaining the site. Using an outside expert was expensive, but necessary to ensure the success of the project. City employees are learning from the consultants how to successfully maintain the plantings and will fully take over the project within the next year.

In the first and second years of a newly planted area, the plants put most of their energy into growing a deep root system. During that time, the top growth of the plants is not as full as it will be in future growing years, and extra efforts must be made to control non-native weed growth. Beginning in the third growing season, the top growth will typically be able to out-compete weed growth and very limited maintenance will be required.

Water and soil quality improvements associated with the plantings include:

- Deep roots (8-12 feet) trap and filter water;
- Prevention of soil erosion;
- Trapping and sequestering of nutrient pollution; and
- Deterrent to geese and thus prevention of e-coli water contamination from the geese.

## **Savings**

Cost savings due to reduced labor for mowing have been realized, as well as reduced wear and tear on mowing equipment and reduced fuel usage. However, due to the initial expense of the planting project, financial return on the investment has not yet been realized. Increasing the social and cultural acceptance of the appearance of native plants, as well as increasing water quality of the site, are additional benefits that are difficult to quantify in terms of cost savings.

## **Recommendations from the city of Noblesville**

To bring about more widespread acceptance of the aesthetics of native plantings, look for opportunities within your community to change public perceptions. Choose a project that you can handle and stick with it. Bring in experts to show you how to be successful. It is not as hard as you might think, if you are committed to the project and give it time to succeed.



Photos above: Black Eyed Susan flowers (left) were a nice surprise in the first year of the project. More blooms will be expected in future years of growth. The overall footprint of the project is indicated in the aerial photo (right).

## **About the CLEAN Program**

CLEAN stands for Comprehensive Local Environmental Action Network. The CLEAN Community Challenge is a voluntary recognition program for cities, towns, and counties that go above and beyond environmental regulatory compliance and make significant commitments to environmental management. For more information about CLEAN, please visit <http://www.in.gov/idem/prevention/2361.htm>.