

Patches of Prairie – April 9, 2003

Regeneration

April 7, 2003. Looking out my window at the blackened landscape were the fire crew burned last week and the trees bending in a howling north wind, I think: “Will spring ever arrive this year?” There have already been signs. The earliest plants are showing leaves, like Death Camas with three to five inches of growth. Winter rosettes are greening up and some weedy annuals have a good start. The elms have already bloomed, but that is not unusual. Sometimes they are “foolish” enough to bloom in February if the weather is warm. And the grass on the burned hillsides is sending up spikes of green.

Town dwellers may think that spring begins with daffodils, tulips and green lawns. The prairie has a different schedule. The dominant grasses are more “conservative”. They are called warm-season grasses because they grow slowly in the cool spring weather. Not until the hot days of summer are Big Bluestem and Indiangrass ready to put on some major height in a flowering stem. Their cousins, the cool-season grasses, are what we usually see in our lawns and roadsides. These are horticultural or agricultural choices that green up early for mowing, grazing or haying in late spring. Kentucky Bluegrass, Brome and Fescue are in this category. They bloom and set seed early and may even disappear from view later in the season. Most of them are not native.

Our plant list shows ten species of forbs or wildflowers blooming before this cold snap. Wild Parsley, Ground Plum, Mead’s Sedge, Prairie Blue Violet and Pussy-toes are just a few, along with the woody Wild Plum and Redbud. If you would like to follow the flow of blooming plants on Konza Prairie through the seasons, go to my web site at www.ksu.edu/konza/keep. There you will find a phenological list. Phenology is the study of relationships between climate and periodic biological phenomena, for example, the first bloom of a wildflower or the return of a migrating bird. On the prairie this phenomenon continues throughout the year with new flowers coming into bloom in a cascade of colors. In the spring we see small plants that hug the ground for protection against the strong winds. But as other plants grow, especially the grasses, the wildflowers become taller in order to compete for light. By fall the plants in bloom are the stately sunflowers and mid-size asters.

If you would like to join us in our study of phenology, print the phenological list from the web site just before you take your prairie hike. If you see something blooming that is not yet indicated for this year and you can identify it, send me an e-mail (keepkonza@ksu.edu) with the date of your observation, the location on Konza Prairie (Nature Trail or Kings Creek Trail, etc.) and your name, if you would like to be recognized for your find. You will be contributing to the research on Konza Prairie.