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Prairie Roots Run Deep

Stephanie Jacques
Kansas State University

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Digging in the dirt in the middle of Kansas State University’s campus is one of the many reasons Katie Kingery-Page, assistant professor of landscape architecture, enjoys her newest project, The Meadow.

A fledgling prairie plant oasis, The Meadow is, at first glance, rough and sharp in contrast to the perfectly manicured lawns around the campus. But Kingery-Page and collaborators look deeper and see it as an opportunity to teach, explore and relax among native plants from the prairie.

“People often have unstated expectations about landscapes and they can run deep, tied to our emotions,” Kingery-Page said. “Landscape is a complex and symbolic part of our human environment.”

The Meadow, outside the university’s Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, merges art, landscape architecture and biology while serving as a multipurpose educational site.

“With more than 30,000 visitors through the doors every year, the museum has the incredible potential to expose people to the research we do at Kansas State University in a way that other places might not,” Kingery-Page said.

She and colleagues want to use The Meadow to coach researchers in visual thinking and learning to explain their research to public audiences. The Meadow also is a valued addition to the museum’s educational program.

“When we do programs, especially for young people, we want to establish a common skill set of close observation and critical thinking,” said Linda Duke, director of the Beach Museum and creator of The Meadow concept. “Science and art have a lot in common. Looking very carefully at things, thinking about what you see and wondering about connections are important practices in both science and art.”

Along with Duke and Kingery-Page, the site’s planning group includes Dede Brokesh, staff member in landscape architecture; Rhonda Janke, associate professor of horticulture; Zac Ratajczak, doctoral graduate in biology; Joe Myers, facilities and grounds maintenance; and the university’s Division of Facilities and other collaborators from across the campus and in the Manhattan community.

The planning group began the project with help from university grounds staff members to mechanically scrape off the existing turf. Community volunteers seeded the site and planted more than 600 seedlings that were grown in the university’s greenhouses. Once fully established — an average of five years from seed — the need for herbicides and water usage other than rainfall should be minimal or nonexistent.

“Using the scraping method, we reduced the amount of herbicide that had to be used to an application on only about 10 percent of the site,” Kingery-Page said. “One of our goals was to have an example of a less chemical- and water-dependent landscape on campus.”

While The Meadow’s above ground appearance will soon resemble a patch of prairie, microbial conditions in the soil will take many years to become similar to an actual prairie. For this reason, the team is careful not to refer to this landscape as a “prairie,” instead referring to it as a curated collection of prairie plants.

“Native prairie plants tend to have deep roots and are very drought-hardy,” Kingery-Page said. “Prairie plants are adapted to varied conditions such as heavy clay, rocky soils and limited available nitrogen, so fertilizing and overwatering can actually favor the weeds.”

According to its creators, The Meadow is an example of a sustainable and educational environment that doubles as an area where people can relax and enjoy their prairie roots.

— By Stephanie Jacques
Division of Communications and Marketing
The Meadow making process:

The prairie plants in The Meadow were selected by the planning group based on three criteria: The plant had to be native to Kansas or the Great Plains region; it added color or interest; and it wasn’t too tall or invasive.

Seeds were donated from local collections or purchased from companies specializing in prairie plants. Some seeds required 30-60 days to stimulate as though they’d been through a winter, then two to four weeks to germinate.

The Meadow was made possible through donations from the Hummel family in memory of William Hummel, Kansas State University professor, and his wife, Sara Hummel. A Green Action Fund grant from the university’s Office of Sustainability and Student Governing Association enabled a second wave of planting and the kick off of interpretation activities. The university’s Division of Facilities, the College of Architecture, Planning & Design, the horticulture, forestry and recreation resources department and numerous community members have made in-kind donations.

The Meadow contains more than 40 species of native grasses and wildflowers. Some of the most dominant species include:

- Little bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*
- Sideoats grama, *Bouteloua curtipendula*
- Woodoats, *Chasmanthium latifolium*
- Brown-eyed Susan, *Rudbeckia triloba*
- Purple coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*
- Plains coreopsis, *Coreopsis tinctoria*
- Rose verbena, *Glandularia canadensis*
- Bee balm, *Monarda fistulosa*