

Planting and caring for your native seedlings

The plants you have ordered will come in 3.5-inch pots, so they are not yet full grown. This is good, because young plants will establish much more quickly and need less coddling than full-grown plants. With good care and proper site selection, most of your seedlings should reach full size by the second year after planting. Some may take a little longer. In any case, be sure to leave extra space around each plant to allow room for them to grow. The descriptions of each species on the website will help you know how large to expect each plant to grow.

If possible, plant your seedlings on a day that is cloudy, not too hot, and not very windy. Better yet, plant just before a nice, gentle rain! Planting in the evening can help avoid harsh conditions if the weather is hot and sunny.

To plant your seedling, dig a hole about twice as wide as the pot and about an inch deeper. Turn the pot upside down and gently squeeze the pot while holding your other hand over the top of the soil, where the plant meets the soil. The plant should come easily out into your hand. If the roots are very thick and matted, take a serrated knife or trowel and run it across the roots in a few places to break them up. This encourages new root growth and can prevent overgrown roots from strangling the plant.

Toss about an inch of potting soil or good, loose dirt into the bottom of the hole, and then place the plant in the hole, retaining as much of the attached, potted soil as possible. Gently scoop in potting soil or loose dirt around the plant. Plant the seedling no deeper than its original depth.

Water the newly planted seedlings very thoroughly, until the soil no longer holds water. Water again the next day, and at least once a week for about a month – more often if it is hot and dry. Once the plants begin to put on new growth, and as long as the leaves do not look wilted and wrinkly, you no longer need to water.

Hardwood mulch (available free at the Wilmette Park District's West Park) placed around the seedling will help retain moisture. However, mulch is not necessary, so long as the seedling is kept well watered during the first month after planting and until it is well established.

Mulch also will slow the approach of weeds, especially when weed-suppressing landscaping material is laid down underneath the mulch. Once weeds begin to appear, regular hand weeding is the best way to keep them under control. Just a few minutes per day is enough to keep things tidy. Avoid using chemical herbicides or pesticides, because these are harmful to the pollinators and beneficial insects that are using your native garden as habitat.

For a natural weed killer, try filling a spray bottle with about 4 cups of vinegar, 1/8 cup of salt, and a few squirts of dish soap. Spray weeds several times over a few days for best results.