

PURPLE PRAIRIE CLOVER

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

DESCRIPTION

This plant with its glowing purple flowers and unusual shape is one of my favourites. Purple Prairie Clover *Dalea purpurea* is a great plant for smaller gardens since it grows only 20-50 cm tall (8"-20"). The many tiny flowers are arranged on short, dense spikes 2-4 cm long (3/4"-1 1/2"). They begin opening at the bottom and work their way up the spike. This gives the effect of little hats perching atop slender stems when half the flowers have opened. The plants are well branched with flowers at the tip of almost every branch, resulting in up to 30-40 flowers on each plant. They begin to bloom in mid to late July and continue into August. The alternate leaves are made up of 3-10 linear leaflets and are quite fragrant. This plant is in the legume family thus enabling it to fix nitrogen from the air and store it in the deep, tap roots.

A close relative of the plant is White Prairie Clover *Dalea candida*. It can be distinguished from the Purple Clover when not in bloom by its wider, oblong leaflets as opposed to the narrower linear leaflets of the purple species. The Purple Clover seed heads are grey while White Prairie Clovers are dark brown. Both of these are popular nectar plants among butterflies and the cylindrical seed heads are a good food source for birds. They also make excellent dried flowers, holding their colour very well. The "Prairie" Clovers are the only native clovers that we have in western Canada. All the other common clovers such as Yellow and White Sweet Clovers, Red Clover and White Clover are introduced forage plants. These introduced Clovers are prolific seeders and we often see them in ditches, pastures, lawns and waste places. They are also very competitive and can choke out desirable native plants.

NATIVE HABITAT

Both the Purple and White Prairie Clovers are widely distributed throughout the south and central Prairies and Parklands with the purple species being more common. They grow from Ontario to Alberta and in the Midwestern U.S. In Manitoba they can be seen in places such as Bird's Hill Park, Spruce Woods Park, Bradley Prairie, Living Prairie Museum and the Tolstoi area. They are quite tolerant of dry conditions due to their deep tap roots.

TRADITIONAL USES

The leaves of White prairie Clover were used for tea to cure the fever of measles. Both species have tough resilient stems so these were bundled together to make brooms. The roots of these plants were also chewed for their pleasant taste. Our first chewing gum!

CULTURE

In the garden Purple Prairie Clover grows best in full sun. It tolerates a wide range of soil conditions from dry to medium to moist with medium being the best. The white prefers dry to medium soil. They can be started from seed or plants can be purchase to set out in the garden in spring after the danger of frost is past or in summer. For good seed germination the seeds should be scarified (rubbed with sandpaper) and the seed separated from the chaff. They germinate in 4-10 days with bottom heat around 21 C. Bottom heat can be achieved with heating mats or by setting the trays under lights or in the sun with a clear covering until germination begins. Plants started in early March will be ready to set outside in early June.

Once established, Purple Prairie Clover is a long lived plant. It achieves full size at about 3 years of age. It is a heat loving plant, so it is always a few weeks later than other perennials to sprout in spring, but it soon catches up. It is a well behaved plant for perennial flower beds since it does not spread from the roots or seed prolifically. It can also be mixed with other native species to create a prairie meadow. It grows well in combination with varieties such as Three Flowered Avens, Heartleaf Alexander, Black Eyed Susan, Philadelphia Fleabane, Meadow Blazing Star, Upland White Aster, Sheep Fescue and Little Bluestem. This will give a prairie meadow with something constantly blooming.

Purple Prairie Clover is a good all round plant, with gorgeous flowers, either fresh or dried, and nectar and seed for butterflies, birds and beneficial bugs. It is a carefree native perennial.

Shirley is the owner of Prairie Originals, a nursery specialising in wildflowers and native prairie grasses near Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. www.prairieoriginals.com