

Rural Iowa residents embrace Adopt-a-Prairie program



Left: The roadside was just grass in front of Cathy Lafrenz's property before the county launched its Adopt-A-Prairie program. Right: The roadside in front of Lafrenz's property is now full of color and provides the perfect entrance for her flower farm. *Photos by Brian Burkholder*

By Kristine Nemec

Some landowners view prairie plants as unkempt weeds that need to be eradicated. But Iowa corn and soybean farmer Hans Schnekloth chose to have prairie plants seeded on the roadside bordering his property after he heard his county would do it for free.

He said he was compelled to add the plants because the area used to be covered by diverse prairie. "If I can do little projects to give pollinators pathways through the county and offset my day job, it creates a natural barrier," he said.

Schnekloth is one of 72 residents who have signed up for Scott Coun-

ty's Adopt-a-Prairie program. Intended for rural landowners who live along a road managed by the county road department, the program was established five years ago by Brian Burkholder, the county's roadside vegetation manager. Hired in 2017, Burkholder is responsible for managing the county's roadside vegetation using safe, environmentally sustainable methods, including strategic mowing and invasive species control. When he started his job, he knew one of his tasks would be planting native vegetation on roadsides where needed, such as those with exposed bare soil.

However, Burkholder thought

one way he could gain public support for his program was to modify the Adopt-a-Road concept, where individuals and groups volunteer to pick up litter in sections of the roadside, and turn it into Adopt-a-Prairie. Residents complete a form on the county website if they want the roadside vegetation team to replace grasses such as smooth brome and fescue growing in the right-of-way in front of their house with native vegetation.

Burkholder obtains the native prairie seed used in the right-of-way for free from the [University of Northern Iowa Tallgrass Prairie Center](#), which annually obtains a grant to purchase seed for Iowa counties that



Inset left: Hans Schnekloth's roadside was pretty barren before prairie plants were planted. Inset right: Schnekloth's roadside is filled with colorful native plants after agreeing to participate in Scott County's free Adopt-A-Prairie program. Photos by Brian Burkholder

longer gets standing water in the ditch. The prairie plants' deep roots help the water infiltrate the soil. He said he finds it interesting to watch how different plants establish in different parts of the ditch that has been seeded.

Cathy Lafrenz, who runs a you-pick flower farm, requested a roadside planting as a way to honor her late husband, Cliff. Lafrenz said Cliff had long paid attention to their local environment, including the roadsides. One year they paid for their anniversary dinner by picking up beer cans by the side of the road. When they would drive, Cliff was all about figuring out what the yellow roadside flowers were. She remembers looking up partridge pea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*), Maximilian sunflower (*Helianthus maximiliani*) and golden Alexander (*Zizia aurea*).

So when she heard about the Adopt-A-Prairie program, she didn't hesitate to participate. During the first two years, she got some comments about the weeds periodically, but those comments are fewer and farther apart as the prairie gets established. Now people are starting to recognize it for what it is.

Lafrenz said the roadside prairie is a perfect entrance for her flower farm because people drive in and see the color. "They put the prairie in... and every day I can see my husband there. It's just a continuation of the values that we hold. It's not very much, but it's what I can do. My prairie makes me incredibly happy."

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have a roadside vegetation program. He applies for grants for equipment and facilities that support the program, such as a seed cooler, through the Iowa Department of Transportation's Living Roadway Trust Fund.

Burkholder plants the seeds using a hydroseeder, which sprays a slurry of water, seed and mulch onto the roadside. He manages the area until it matures, and after that residents can agree to handle maintenance such as removing noxious weeds if they want to. A lot of people request to do the upkeep, which is really helpful.

The biggest challenge? Some residents want the prairie "right now" when it takes at least three years for

the plants to establish when starting with seed. Burkholder will receive complaints from neighbors who think the plantings look weedy, so he explains why he is planting native plants and offers to come out and explain which plants are native and which are the true weeds. So far no one has taken him up on his offer of a site visit.

Once the plants are established, residents have been pleased with the benefits provided by the plantings. Schnekloth said his wife and children like to pick the flowers and make bouquets. "It's a nice addition to life." They also see a lot more butterflies flying around than they used to.

He also appreciates how he no