



# Driftless Prairies: Native Ecosystems

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# Reaping What You Sow

It's that time!!! Fall is my favorite time for many reasons...seed collecting being one of them! Not only do I love collecting the seeds but I love cleaning them, sorting them, and weighing them. The whole process of gathering seeds to disseminate to other places is exciting!! Our 4-year prairie is producing a number of good seeds and in quantities sustainable for collecting. If there are only a few plants, I buy or barter for seed. If the plants are plentiful I collect 30-50% of each plants' seeds. I want to make sure not to overcollect because I want them to self sow.

To successfully collect seed, there are 3 main areas to address: 1) record keeping, 2) equipment, and 3) techniques.

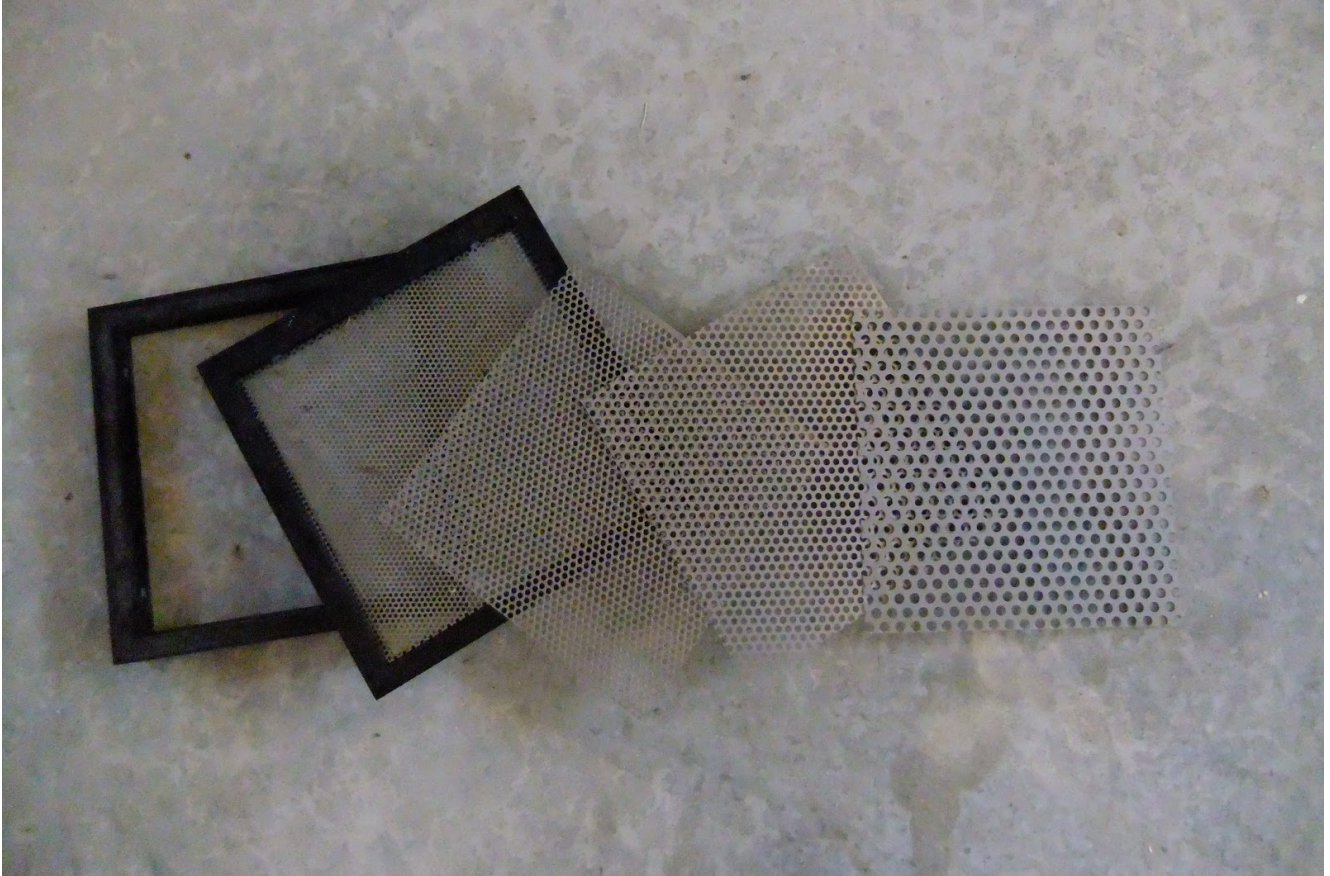
The process of **recordkeeping** is simple but one must be diligent. If you're collecting for the first time, you don't have a list from previous years to give you clues on species readiness times. This means you'll need to be out in the prairie, savanna, or woods daily checking to see if the seed is ready. Here's the process I have found works very well:

- On a sheet of paper, I note the date and the species collected
- A label with the species name stays with those particular seeds at all time (date and collection location is added if there's more than 1 location or a large area with management units)
- Once the seed is processed, I note the weight on the sheet of paper mentioned in step 1 of the process

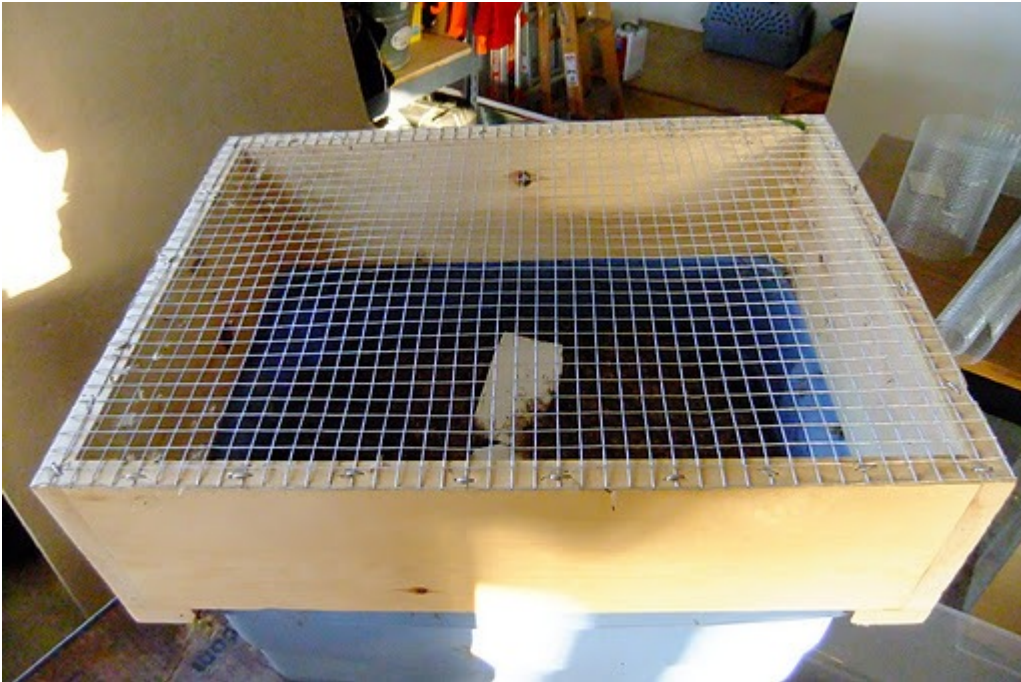
There are a few indispensable pieces of **equipment** required for collecting seed from your prairie or other prairies that you have permission to collect from. Below is a list:

- 4-5 gal. buckets

- A strap to carry the bucket
- Sharp clippers
- Various sizes of seed screens
- Large plastic tubs or sleds
- Paper bags, plastic bags, markers



These screens are interchangeable to fit into the plastic frames. The most economical screens I have found come from Hoffman Mfg. The most useful sizes are 8/64, 12/64, 14/64, and 20/64



This screening piece is made with hardware cloth and designed to fit on top of a plastic bin. Two sizes are most useful, one with  $\frac{1}{4}$ " hardware cloth and one with  $\frac{1}{2}$ " hardware cloth. This is very economical to make.

This is my seed collecting strap and clippers. This strap can be found at Ace Hardware for a nominal price. I prefer this one because it fits around my waist and not across my shoulder. It's strong and durable as is the clasp.

It's a Stihl PP30 clippers with holder. The holder makes it much easier to "holster" the nippers when needing your hands free for other activities, such as pulling a weed.





As a person with a small prairie and no hammermill, I have found certain **techniques** to be most time efficient. After a few years of collecting, you'll probably develop adaptations that will make it better for you. However you do the processing, the most important thing is to make sure the seed is thoroughly dried before processing and storing in plastic bags. After all that work, you do not want your seed to mold. Here's a general list of techniques:

1. Thwack – This is for seeds in pods that are open at the top. Clip the seed head, turn it upside down in the bucket, and thwack it on the inside of the bucket
2. Clip and Scrape. This is for seeds with fluff. Clip the seed head, lay out to dry when back at home, then scrap the twigs across a hardware cloth (see pictures of equipment). Most of the fluff will fall into the container.
3. Hand Strip. This is for seeds that crumble or strip. I

pinch or strip them off the plants with my hands and crumble them into the bucket. If you're collecting for a large operation, you would cut the seed heads and then hammermill.

4. Milkweed. These plants deserve their own special technique. Pull the pods off the plant, **before** they have burst but when the seeds are brown. If they are still in the pod, it is much easier to strip the fluff from the seeds. Open the pod, grasp the fluff in one hand while scraping the seeds in a downward motion into a bucket with the other.
5. Hand clean. More plants with special processing techniques. Gentians and lilies are unique because they have chambered pods. Legumes can be broken open by hand and the seed picked out. If you had a hammermill, you would run this through it, but without one, you need to open each pod and scrape the seeds into a bucket.
6. Comb. Little Bluestem is the only plant that uses this technique. Using a common hair comb, drag it through the fluffy seed heads. They are collected on the comb, which can then be scraped off into the bucket.

It's difficult to describe these processes and so much easier to demonstrate them. Some species are very inexpensive to purchase, yet are time-consuming to collect; for example Little Bluestem is hardly worth the effort unless you want a specific genotype.

And, lastly, remember to use a face mask when cleaning seeds. They are dirty and dusty and you'll want to keep as much of that out of your lungs as possible. Happy harvesting!!!!

Resources:

For purchasing screens: [Hoffman Mfg.](#)

Collecting, Processing, and Germinating Seeds of Wildland Plants by James A. Young and Cheryl G. Young.

Note: Since writing this, we have acquired a hammermill, which we have found to be essential.

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