

From Mowing to Meadows... *Developing a Wilder Aesthetic*

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Converting part of your yard to meadow can save you time and money — think about less frequent mowing. And meadows help filter our groundwater, control flooding, add visual appeal and provide critical habitat for songbirds and pollinators. So sit back and watch the grass grow!

Grass is Far from “Green”

Americans spend about \$30 billion every year to maintain more than 32 million acres of lawn—that’s about the size of Pennsylvania. We pour 270 billion gallons of water per week on our lawns and apply 10 times more fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides than farmers do to their crops.

A typical 3.5-horsepower gas lawn mower emits about the same amount of volatile organic compounds in an hour as a car driven 340 miles. On top of that, the EPA estimates that we spill 17 million gallons of fuel each year filling our mowers—more than the Exxon Valdez oil spill!

Making Meadows

The easiest way to convert a portion of lawn to meadow is simply to mow only once or twice a year. Often the best areas to convert are those that are difficult to mow, such as wet or steep areas. Other ideal locations include transition areas between turf and woodlands, stream corridors and areas that aren’t often used by your family.

At first, your new meadow will be a new home to the species that originally made up the lawn: usually non-native, cool-season grass species such as Kentucky bluegrass, fescues and ryes. With time, the vegetation diversifies. Native warm-season grasses—little and big bluestem and purpletop—will begin to appear.

Wildflowers will follow, depending on what species are seeded by local plants and by seeds in wildlife droppings. Species such as goldenrod, asters, black-eyed Susan, daisy, yarrow, Queen Anne’s lace and purple coneflower are common in meadows.

Better Habitat for Wildlife

Over the last century, changes in agricultural technology and loss of land to development have caused a decline in the quantity and quality of grasslands habitats for wildlife. In particular, these changes have threatened the survival of birds—such as Eastern Meadowlark, Bobolink, Grasshopper Sparrow—that depend on large meadows (25+ acres).

While small meadows won’t provide breeding habitat for these threatened species, they do provide important resting and feeding areas along migratory pathways. And you’ll get to enjoy the sight of avian species such as Red-wing Blackbird, American Goldfinch, and various swallows and sparrows that are far less likely to frequent your manicured lawn.

Beneficial Pollinators

Another benefit of allowing turf to evolve to meadow is the increased presence of pollinators. Many beneficial pollinators—bees, beetles, butterflies—are currently at risk from loss of habitat and pesticide use. This is especially troubling because pollinators are essential to the production of 75 percent of the staple crops that feed humans and for 90 percent of all flowering plants in the world.

Beneficial pollinators have very basic habitat requirements: flowers to forage, host plants for egg laying, and an environment free of pesticides. Grasslands and wildflower meadows offer these essentials in spades.

Visual Appeal

Meadows offer a sensory experience every season of the year. A meadow of tall, waving grass is a beautiful sight on a breezy



Grasshopper Sparrow



Eastern Meadowlark



Monarch Butterfly



Eastern Bluebird



Eastern Black Swallowtail

June day. In mid-summer, it's literally abuzz with activity. There's much to observe: a bird looking for a meal, bees flying from flower to flower, the iridescence of a butterfly, or the steady chatter of crickets. Many meadow wildflowers persist into fall and attract songbirds that feast on seed heads. Even in winter, the dried stalks of meadow grasses and flowers are striking.

To make clear that a meadow is intentional and managed, and not a landscaping oversight, maintain a mowed turf swath as a sharp edge around the borders. If your meadow is large enough, consider incorporating a trail network so you (and your senses) can get closer to the action!

Meadow Maintenance

Mow your meadow at least once a year to keep it from reverting to a forest. But remember: timing is everything. Mowing between April 1 and early July is detrimental to wildlife because it removes nesting cover, destroys nests and eggs, and kills young birds and animals. Similarly, mowing between mid-July and late-October doesn't allow vegetation enough time to renew itself before winter, so it won't offer food and cover for wildlife until the following spring.

Mowing between March 1 and April 1 is ideal. Set your mower deck to a height of six to eight inches and mow away!

Keep an eye out for invasive plants that can quickly take over your new meadow. Eliminate invasives by spot mowing, selective spraying with an herbicide, or manual or mechanical pulling. Use only aquatic approved herbicides within 50 feet of streams.

Given the myriad of benefits of replacing turf with meadow, it's certainly worth considering. You can start small, but beware ... making meadows can be addictive! After a few seasons of observing the flourishing grasses and wildflowers, you'll never look at turf the same again. ♦

Natural Lands Trust is dedicated to protecting forests, fields, streams and wetlands essential to the sustainability of life in eastern PA and southern NJ. Since 1953, it has preserved more than 100,000 acres, including 42 nature preserves. Millions of residents enjoy the healthy habitats, clean air and water, recreational opportunities, and scenic beauty provided by these preserved land. Visit NatLands.org.

