

IN THE SOURLANDS

One of the simplest ways to provide for birds and other wildlife and increase our own enjoyment of nature is to convert lawns into meadows! In this article, Sourland Stewards' Naturalist Advisor, Jared Rosenbaum, describes this process.

Transforming Your Lawn into a Meadow

Here's some Sourland Mountain magic: the first year we stopped mowing our lawn, four native orchids volunteered in our little meadow. Our wildflower season begins with the diminutive spring beauty and ends with the purples, whites and yellows of the fall asters.

The process was simple, and the results are magnificent. Even those living in much more urban environments can welcome butterflies, songbirds, and the grand floral display of the American prairie into their front yards by transforming a lawn area to a native wildflower meadow.

The close-cropped lawn has a very particular history. Once upon a time, European nobility used vast lawns to flaunt the amount of unproductive land they could afford to keep. Throughout the last century, we've all aspired to make that same statement. As lawns became the cultural norm, an incredible "arms race" of lawn machinery and chemicals developed to keep our home landscapes sterile and conforming.

Americans now maintain over 45 million acres of lawn; we use 70 million pounds of pesticides on them per year; and 30% of the water consumed on the East Coast goes to watering them. Lawns contribute to erosion and flooding events, and the mowers and blowers we use to maintain them are horrible polluters, emitting 10 to 34 times more hydrocarbon per hour than a typical car.

Converting part or all of your lawn to a meadow is an easy way to surround yourself with beauty and interest. It's also a good way to save money, time, and the environment.

Creating a meadow is a systematic process. Here are the steps to take when transforming a lawn to bountiful blooms:

1. Site Prep

Get rid of the existing turf grasses with a one-time application of glyphosate herbicide, by repeated tillage, or by smothering with black plastic.

2. Select a Native Seed Mix

Select a native seed mix comprised of wildflowers (sometimes known as "forbs") and bunch grasses. Don't settle for any "wildflower" mix: make sure to choose one comprised of *native perennials*. Two great sources for seed or inspiration are Prairie Nursery and Prairie Moon Nursery. Ernst Conservation Seeds has many locally native species as well. Seed nurseries will be able to advise you on the quantity of seed needed for your project.

3. Sow seeds

Seeds can be surface sown in the fall, and snow and frost heave will incorporate them over the winter. Or, sow into lightly tilled ground in spring and press seeds into the ground with feet or a roller. Fall sowings are easier and often lead to more wildflowers compared to bunch grasses.

If your meadow is very small, it can be economical to plant it, like a garden, using small live plants called "plugs", available from native plant nurseries.

4. Keep a Level Playing Field

During the first year, mow the emerging meadow back to 4 - 6 inches high every time it reaches 12 inches tall. This will keep annual weeds from smothering the slower-growing perennial seedlings, and lessen weed seed production.

5. Maintain it For Life

After the first year, your meadow will only need to be mowed once a year at most. This annual mowing sets back woody plants that may establish in your meadow, and should be done in late winter before new growth has commenced. Meadows can be mowed with string trimmer, scythe, or by hired hands if growth is too thick for your household mower.

If your old mower is feeling left out, use it to shape artful paths and borders for your new meadow, making the meadow purposeful looking and accessible. Keep an eye out for perennial non-native weeds such as mugwort, creeping thistle, and Chinese bush clover, and remove them before they have a chance to spread.

It will take a few years to reach its full glory, but once your meadow is established, it will live perennially and be intricate, beautiful, and abundant. Watching the pollinators it attracts and the shifting colors of flowers and foliage through the season will be a welcome change from endlessly mowing and blowing a short, boring carpet of green grass!

For more information and resources on creating a native meadow, see the Sourland Conservancy's *Sourland Stewards* program at Sourland.org/stewardship.