

MEADOWS: AN ALTERNATIVE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR CONNECTICUT LANDSCAPES

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Some areas of Connecticut's landscapes that are currently mown and managed as low-cut turf may be suitable to serve as a tall-grass meadow. Areas at property perimeters, near wetlands, or on slopes and uneven terrain may be costly to maintain at a low height of cut and a challenge to access. Replacing extraneous areas of lawn with native vegetation provides essential habitat for many species threatened by the rapid sprawl of suburban development. Transitioning such areas to meadows can alter the lawn design and yield positive financial and environmental benefits.

WHAT IS A MEADOW?

A meadow is a field of grasses and native wildflowers, which becomes self-sustaining and flourishes naturally over time.¹ Creating a meadow incorporates native plants into the landscape and extends species diversity. Native meadow plants are resilient, adapted to the regional climate, and can survive adverse conditions. Meadows that are incorporated successfully into property management reduce maintenance expenses over time.

Advantages of a flourishing, established meadow:

1. **Reduce the overall use of fertilizers and pesticides in the landscape.** Overuse of any product can alter the balance and influence the health of beneficial soil organisms that support the ecosystem.
2. **Conserve fuel, labor, water, and other inputs.** *Once established*, meadows require little maintenance. Native and select non-invasive introduced plants are better adapted to the existing soil conditions, reducing cost and maintenance. An annual mowing, in either late fall or very early spring, is all that is required.
3. **Control soil erosion** through the diverse assortment of meadow plants. The deep root systems of many meadow grasses and flowering plants hold and stabilize the soil, infiltrate large quantities of stormwater, prevent excessive water movement over soil surfaces, and recharge our aquifers.
4. **Produce windbreaks** that moderate temperatures in the surrounding area.
5. **Establish healthy, sustainable ecosystems.** Restoring portions of the landscape to a more natural environment increases populations of beneficial microorganisms, plants, and insects. Meadows provide food and shelter for a wide variety of native plant, insect, bird and animal species.
6. **Create beautifully evolving landscapes** that calm the senses and stimulate connection to nature. Native environments provide visual stimulation, are pleasing to the eye, and improve the overall quality of life of CT residents. These dynamic, yet peaceful, areas are teeming with life and activity that inspire interest in numerous butterflies, caterpillars, birds and other wildlife.



Snakeroot (Ageratina altissima) attracts butterflies in a thriving meadow. (Photo by Tom Barry)

¹ *Urban and Suburban Meadows: Bringing Meadows to Big and Small Spaces*, Catherine Zimmerman, 2010.

A MATURE MEADOW IS LOW-MAINTENANCE, NOT NO-MAINTENANCE

- **Realistic expectations are necessary when creating a meadow.** An understanding of ecological succession is critical to a meadow's success. A meadow is a natural ecological community that evolves and changes over time to be displaced by woody plants and trees.
- **Maintaining a meadow slows the natural process of ecological succession that would eventually occur over time.** True grassland ecosystems are maintained through animal grazing and naturally occurring fires that allow grasses to dominate. Mowing annually effectively mimics this natural grazing process and prevents woody plants from displacing the meadow grasses and perennials.
- **Proper plant selection, site preparation, and maintenance is critical** to designing, establishing, and sustaining a flourishing, beautiful meadow. **Once established, and over time, a meadow can reduce labor and maintenance costs; however, a meadow is not a “no-maintenance” proposition.** Particularly in the first few years, extra care must be taken so a healthy proportion of desired perennials and grasses become established. Weeds must be discouraged or removed. After several years, and as the meadow matures, the demands of maintenance will lessen. The better the site is prepared, cleared, designed, and maintained during the first few years, the more established and resilient the meadow will become.



Meadows are typically composed of a large proportion of warm and cool season grasses to stabilize the planting, prevent weed encroachment, and add four season visual interest.

(Photos by Glenn Dreyer, top; Vickie Wallace, right)



DO MEADOWS CO-EXIST WITH LOCAL ORDINANCES?

Research local laws before investing time and energy in the development of a meadow. County or town ordinances may restrict the height or type of plants that may be grown. A variance may be required in some towns to alter the landscape and create a meadow. Signs can be used to educate neighbors. The environmental, aesthetic, and health benefits of meadows as wildlife-friendly enhancements will add dimension and an improved emotional quality of life to CT landscapes.

RECOMMENDED NATIVE PERENNIALS AND GRASSES FOR A CONNECTICUT MEADOW

Awl sedge (*Carex stipata*)

Bee balm (*Monarda fistulosa*)

Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*)

Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*)

Blazing star (*Liatris spicata*)

Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)

Coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*)

Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*)

Fringed sedge (*Carex crinita*)

Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*)

Ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*)

Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)

Mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*)

New England aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*)

Pale purple coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*)

Pink Muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*)

Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*)

Purple lovegrass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*)

Queen of the prairie (*Filipendula rubra*)

Sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*)

Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*)

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)

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