Meadowscaping (published 2025-06-14)
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Meadowscaping is applying the principles of a meadow to your landscape. It's very much like returning a grass lawn back to a natural state. Meadows are a mixture of about 50% grasses and 50% flowers, both perennials and annuals. Native plants are used to ensure success and provide the best resources to pollinators.

There are quite a few benefits for homeowners and nature when lawn is converted to a meadow. Meadows require very little maintenance once established. There is no need for fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides. No weekly mowing and no watering are required. That saves money and time. You'll also get to enjoy the beauty of a succession of flowers and the winter color and movement of native ornamental grasses.

The benefits to nature are impressive, too. Meadows work hard. The plants infiltrate and filter stormwater, store carbon, return nutrients to the soil, build soil through breaking down over time, and provide food, protection and shelter for animals and other plants.

Choose a location with the plants in mind. Many meadow plants thrive in full sun with good soil drainage. If you only have part sun and wet areas for the meadow, make sure your plant selections will grow in those conditions. You can start small with a patch of lawn. That way you can see what works best in your location and what you like best about the meadow. Then you can expand your site a bit at a time.

Proper preparation of the site is important for giving your new plants a good start. The grass and weeds and weed seeds in the lawn area need to be removed. This can be done by using a sod cutter, occultation (using black plastic to prevent photosynthesis), solarization (using clear plastic to raise the temperature high enough to kill weed and seeds) or smothering the growth by scalping the area with a mower and covering with cardboard and mulch to kill previous growth. You can even plant a cover crop to choke out weeds. As a last resort, a broad-spectrum herbicide can be used but is not recommended and delays planting the meadow until it is safe to sow seeds or plant. See resources at the end of this article for details on how to do one of these methods.

It will take time to kill grass and weeds if not cutting it away with a sod cutter. So, leave the area covered from mid-June to mid-September. Your soil should be bare by this time. Rake away any dead material that remains or mow the cover crop. Do not apply fertilizer, compost or manure. Native plants prefer poorer soil than lawns and many exotic plants.

Check out which flowers and grasses are best for a meadow. Annual flowers can give you color the first year while the perennials are germinating and becoming established. Plants loved by pollinators and resistant to deer are highly recommended. Some examples are switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium)*, purpletop grass (*Tridens flavus*), milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), liatris (*Liatris squarrulosa*), coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), asters (*Symphyotrichum leave)*, showy goldenrod (*Solidago speciosa*,) and columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*). The goal for flowering plants is to have a sequence of blooms from spring through fall. Lists of native plants can be found at: "Tennessee Recommended – East

Tennessee," https://www.wildflower.org/collections/printable_QR_main.php?collection=TN and "Landscaping with Native Plants East Tennessee," https://www.hamiltontn.gov/PDF/WaterQuality/bmps/11.1.pdf

Meadows can be created with seed mixes which are very cost effective but take longer to develop an established meadow. You can buy already mixed seeds or buy seeds individually to create your own combination. Buying plugs is another option for a little faster growth but cost more than seeds. If you want a meadow even faster, you can plant more mature plants and grasses. Whichever plan you choose, be patient. Plantings need to be dense enough to prevent weeds from growing. It will take 2 to 3 years for plants to mature and fill in the space.

If you opt for seeds, be careful in choosing a supplier. There are a lot of seed mixes for sale that contain non-native plant seeds or have seeds for plants not best suited to your location.

Meadows can be started in spring or early summer. Fall is also a great time to sow seeds. Broadcast seeds mixed in a carrier such as vermiculite. Gently rake the seeds to cover with about ¼ inch of soil or walk over the area or roll it to ensure seeds make good contact with the soil. Cover lightly with straw or mulch.

Be patient and make sure to keep weeds cut back. Avoid pulling weeds to prevent disturbing your meadow seeds and seedlings. Herbicides should not be used. Even if you're careful, you could harm your new plants.

There are so many beautiful native ornamental grasses and perennials that your lawn or part of it can look natural and incredible.

Resources

"Starting a Native Wildflower Meadow," https://piedmontmastergardeners.org/starting-a-native-wildflower-meadow/

"Planting for Pollinators - Establishing a Wildflower Meadow from Seed," https://extension.unh.edu/sites/default/files/migrated_unmanaged_files/Resource007652_Rep11219.pdf

"Surround Yourself with Beneficial Beauty: Plant a Meadowscape!" https://ngb.org/meadowscaping/

"Meadows and Prairies: Wildlife-Friendly Alternatives to Lawn," https://extension.psu.edu/meadows-and-prairies-wildlife-friendly-alternatives-to-lawn

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT's YouTube site for helpful videos: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ

Or Washington County's YouTube site: https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty

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If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.