

Plant a Meadow Garden

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If your gardening plans this year include doing something for the environment, one of the best decisions you can make is to turn a patch of your lawn into a meadow garden. Meadow plants provide nectar for pollinators, seeds for migrating birds, cover for ground nesting birds and overwintering sites for beneficial insects. They don't need fertilizer or pesticides. And their deep roots will readily soak up rainwater, preventing runoff and erosion. Did I mention that meadow gardens also add four season interest to your landscape? As well as summer long butterfly watching.

Meadows can be as large or as small as you would like – ranging in size from a small pocket garden to several acres. If a small garden is in your plans here are some tips on getting started.

Prepare the site:

Choose a site that gets at least 6 hours of sun. It's important to kill all existing vegetation so that your meadow garden starts out weed free. Although you can use chemicals for this step, I find it easiest to use sheet mulching. Begin by mowing the area to be planted as short as possible. Water the area, then cover with cardboard or newspaper ten sheets thick. Make sure no light gets through this barrier. Water well. Place mulch over this layer. You can use shredded leaves, leaves and grass clippings, or hardwood mulch, whatever is handy. Water again. If you sheet mulch now, wait several months until the grass has died. By September you will be ready to plant. Meanwhile, you can start thinking about the plants you will use.

Choose your plants

The plants you choose will depend on the site: Is it wet or dry? Does is the soil well drained or soggy? Is the soil fertile or poor? (A soil test will give you information on fertility. These are available at your local Extension office). Most meadow plants prefer nutrient poor soil and will not do well in soil that is fertilized.

Decide how tall you would like your meadow to be. If you want to use it as a screen you will want to choose plants that are 6 ft or more tall. If you are using it to replace lawn you will choose shorter plants.

50% or more of a natural meadow is made up of native grasses. The remaining plants are flowering perennials, referred to as forbs. Depending on the look you want for your meadow you can increase the number of forbs. Adding more forbs will create a flower garden effect.

Some grasses that you may want to consider for a short meadow include Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*), Sideoats grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), or Little Bluestem (*Schizachryium scoparius*). There are many native perennials to choose from. For a dry site, Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) is a must have. Add some Nodding onion (*Allium cernuum*), Spiderwort (*Tradescantia ohioensis*), Penstemon (*Penstemon digitalis*), Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia fulgida var. fulgida*) and one of the asters, and you will have a meadow that will be in bloom from spring to fall). If your site is constantly moist, try Bee Balm (*Monarda didyma*), White turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*), or Helen's Flower (*Helenium autumnale*). These are just a few of the plants to choose from. For more plant choices and places to purchase native plants, call the Garden Hotline at 840-7408 or stop by the Native Plant sale "Ask the Expert" table.

Planting your meadow garden

For a small meadow of 50 to 100 square feet, purchase plants in plugs or quart pots and space them 12"

apart depending on the mature size of the plant. Plant directly through the mulch bed. Remember to free the roots on each plant and water well. Depending on the weather you may need to water several more times before the plants are established. The mulch will help hold in moisture and keep down weeds for the first growing season.

Maintaining your meadow garden

Until the plants are mature and grow together (typically after a year and a half) you will need to pull invading weeds, particularly at the edges. Yearly maintenance involves cutting the plants down at the end of March. Stems can be broken apart and left in the meadow or removed and used in the compost pile.

You will be surprised how quickly your meadow garden grows and becomes a haven for butterflies, birds and other pollinators. Sit back and enjoy the parade of colorful visitors!

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