

The New Lawn: Shaggy, Chic and Easy on the Mower

By ANNE MARIE CHAKER

What if the grass in your yard was supposed to be that long? Pushing back against perfect lawns, some homeowners are adopting a shaggy-chic look for their properties, planting a long-haired meadow in the backyard, and even in front.

Meadows are naturally pretty and abuzz with blooms and butterflies, but their real appeal is this: Once the meadow is established, mowing is recommended just once a year.

Homeowners and residential landscapers are taking a cue from the wild and woolly designs cropping up in high-profile public spaces.

New York City's elevated High Line has three sections devoted to meadow plantings including feather grasses and wildflowers. The 6-acre Palisades Garden Walk under construction in Santa Monica, Calif., is set to include plantings of grasses and sages under olive and oak trees. Acres of grasslands and meadows feature in plans for Apple Inc.'s new, spaceshiplike headquarters in Cupertino, Calif.

Meadows are "in fashion," says Lisa Tziona Switkin, associate partner at James Corner Field Operations, the New York landscape architects for the High Line and Palisades projects.



The view of the meadow at Bill Montgomery and Elizabeth Glazer's Lakeville, Conn., summer home, with purple coneflower and tickseed.

Partly it's a backlash against traditional lawns, which get a bad rap because of the quantity of water, chemical fertilizer and energy they tend to consume. "People don't want to be associated with something that wastes resources and energy," Ms. Switkin says.

Many architects and home designers, though, like a meadow's undone look.

When "soft edges contrast nicely with the modern, straight lines of architecture, it makes a nice counterpoint," says Leonard Kady, a New York architect who maintains a wetland meadow at his summer home on 2.5 acres in Washington, Conn.

In Landenberg, Pa., North Creek Nurseries says inquiries for "plugs," or tiny plants, for meadow and other natural-looking landscapes have climbed 60% a year for the past three years. "I get calls pretty much every day about meadows," says sales manager Claudia West. Prairie Nursery Inc., of Westfield, Wis., says sales this year are running 20% ahead of last year.

Meadows can be a sore point with suburban homeowners associations, whose lawn codes often frown upon anything remotely weedy-looking. In Iowa City, Iowa, Mary Losch, 52, had to present a landscape-design proposal for her newly-built three-bedroom house to the subdivision's homeowners association. The plan, in addition to the predictable foundation shrubs and lawn, called for a ribbon of meadow around the perimeter of the 1-acre lot. The Prairie View Estates homeowners' association, which requires that "lots be maintained free of weeds," gave it the go-ahead.

Then there are the neighbors. Last year, when Ms. Losch's meadow perimeter was first seeded, it looked weedy and abandoned. Earlier this spring,

a neighbor approached her about the "interesting" landscaping.

"I figured it was about time somebody asked," says Ms. Losch, a psychology professor at the University of Northern Iowa. "I explained that it was intentional, that we hadn't just let it go, and that in another year it would be clear. I think she was relieved."

Establishing a meadow is usually a three-year process. Year One, with the yard a ragged mess of soil, seedlings, and weeds, can make some homeowners wonder what they were thinking. At this stage, some people get discouraged and go back to lawn, says Judy Nauseef, the Iowa City landscape designer who handled Ms. Losch's property.

"You have to get over the sense that it's going to be all neat," says Bill Montgomery, 51, a New York-based money manager who had a meadow designed for his Lakeville, Conn., summer home two years ago.

Larry Weaner, the Glenside, Pa., designer who created Mr. Montgomery's meadow, recommends keeping it sheared at 6 to 12 inches for the first year. Use a conventional mower set at the highest height, or a weed-whacking device, about once every four weeks in spring and summer. That prevents weeds from reseeding and encourages the desirable plants to focus energy on developing strong roots, not blooms.

By Year Three, you should be able to put the mower away, Mr. Weaner says. Then, a once-a-year mow-down in late winter is all that is needed. No watering, no fertilizing.

Meadows are flowering and at their best from mid-spring to summer. To keep things interesting in the dead of winter, meadow designers say it's important to plant grasses, which offer movement and texture when nothing is flowering.

Meadows don't have to look completely wild, designers say. An urban meadow can be made up of a few select species planted in drifts, which soften stone walkways or patios.

At least half of meadow plantings should be grasses, Mr. Weaner says. Not only do their root systems help stabilize soil and inhibit weeds, but they also offer movement, texture and year-round interest—even when the blooms have long disappeared. Otherwise, "when flowers are finished, all you're left with are a bunch of dead flowers," says John Greenlee, a Brisbane, Calif., meadow designer and co-author of "The American Meadow Garden." Grasses are "the framework that the flowers have to hang on."

To establish a meadow, it usually takes 10 to 20 pounds of wildflower and grass seed for each acre, says Howard Bright, president of Ion Exchange, a specialty nursery in Harpers Ferry, Iowa. Using the nursery's "short prairie" seed mix, which costs \$125 per pound, the cost to cover a half-acre property in seed would run from \$625 to \$1,250.



After his Charlottesville, Va., home was completed two years ago, Jeff Holmes had to decide how to landscape the 5-acre property. Pictured, a landscape company removed most of the vegetation with applications of herbicide.

It was relief from the weekly mow that drew Jeff Holmes, a 42-year old professor in Charlottesville, Va., to the idea of a meadow. After construction of his modern four-bedroom house was completed two years ago, he had to decide what to do with the yard. The rural 5-acre property surrounded by forest has a tenuous water supply from a well. "There's not a lot of ground water here and we had no interest in dumping water on a giant lawn," Mr. Holmes says.

He hired J.W. Townsend Inc., a Charlottesville landscape company, which removed all existing vegetation with an application of herbicide in fall 2010, followed by another in spring 2011. In June last year, the yard was ready to be seeded with grasses and wildflowers selected by the company's meadow specialist, Ed Yates, to work well with the region's hard-packed soil and dry conditions.



The meadow in June 2012, one year after seeding with grasses and annual and perennial wildflowers.

Some of Mr. Yates's favorites included an annual tickseed (*Coreopsis tinctoria*), useful because it would flower in the first year. In the meadow's second year, a succession of blooms has already appeared, starting in spring with evening primroses (*Oenothera speciosa*) and white yarrows (*Achillea millefolium*) and orange blanketflowers (*Gaillardia aristata*) blooming now.

Marc Pastorek, a garden designer and meadow specialist in Covington, La., says grasses in the moist, deep South are typically longer than the short-haired meadows of drier climates. The region's hard-packed clay soil welcomes a unique mix of plants with deep-penetrating root systems. Some of his favorites include Rattlesnake Master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) and Prairie Blazing Star (*Liatris pycnostachya*).

For the meadow Mr. Pastorek designed for a 2.5-acre property in Grand Junction, Colo., the plants were remarkably different, including blue grama grass (*Bouteloua gracilis*), Buffalograss (*Bouteloua dactyloides*) and Silver lupine (*Lupinus albifrons*), which grow best in drier conditions.

"You learn so much about your natural landscape by these plantings," Mr. Pastorek says. "The obstacle is producing it without it becoming an eyesore."

Five Steps to Your Own Meadow

Experts say meadows take up to three years to become fully established.

1. Get rid of your lawn. Apply herbicide, once in fall and once in spring, to get the job done fast. A nonchemical route involves 'smothering' the lawn with cardboard and mulch and waiting a year, says Neil Diboll, president of Prairie Nursery. Don't till or rake, which may bring up unwanted seeds.
2. Consider the soil, and ask a local nursery for advice about what grows best in your area.
3. Select grass as well as flowers. Aim for a 50-50 mix.
4. Start planting. Seeds take longer, but they are more cost-effective than 'plugs' or tiny plants. In general, use 10 to 20 pounds of seed per acre.
5. Maintain. In Year One, mow or whack to keep the meadow at 6 to 12 inches. Once established, it needs mowing just once a year.

CBJ: Meadow-scaping emerging trend in landscaping industry

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Posted: Sunday, August 11, 2013 10:32 pm | Updated: 10:36 pm, Sun Aug 11, 2013.

Posted on August 11, 2013
by Nate Delesline III

A meadow of wildflowers might appear to be an occurrence of natural beauty, but in the Charlottesville area it's just as likely to be another indicator of a healthy, cultivated business.

Purposefully designed, installed and maintained wildflower meadows are among the services provided by J.W. Townsend, an Albemarle County-based landscaping company that is marking its 30th year in business.

"We learn something new and different every year ... it's a very specialized field," said Jay Townsend, the company's founder. "This new dimension has been a lot of fun to develop and promote." The company has planted more than 100 acres of meadows.

The idea of cultivated meadows of wildflowers and grasses isn't new. But it has resurfaced in recent years as more environmentally sensitive landscaping designs have become more popular.

"The meadows just constantly evolve," said Ed Yates, the company's wildflower meadows expert.

Yates typically seeds meadows with about 20 varieties of flowers and grasses. Nearly all of them are native to and thrive in the region and none is invasive. The plant varieties include brown-eyed Susan, bee balm, partridge pea, New England Aster and bluestem grass.

"The native grasses and wildflowers are a big improvement on the mowed field that we had been

viewing," said Roxanne Booth, who turned to J.W. Townsend under Yates' guidance to convert 17 acres of her property in Albemarle County to meadow. "We enjoy the views, as well as the wildlife attracted to the meadow."

Yates has about 15 years of experience in the industry and previously worked in Northern Virginia and at a privately owned arboretum.

In about a year, Yates said, unattractive thickets can be transformed into colorful habitats for butterflies and ground-dwelling birds, such as quail. The meadow plants are tolerant of drought and poor soil and don't need regular mowing or irrigation.

Yates and Townsend said a meadow conversion is popular with people who are looking for a bit more variety, diversity and beauty for their properties.

"We have seen endless goldfinches, butterflies and assorted small birds and bees. This month, we have seen two turkey nests and fledglings who had not been there before," Booth said by email.

"The ability for bird life to come into these meadows is just extraordinary," said Townsend. "We spend a lot of time educating people about the environmental pluses and the benefits."

Townsend, who attended Albemarle High School and Virginia Tech, credits a people-oriented approach for his company's success. The company employs about 50 people, and about 70 percent of clients are residential customers.

"Our company has been able to attract some very capable people," Townsend said. "If I could point to any one single thing that has changed in last 30 years ... that's what enables us to operate the way we do today."

"We've had a pretty conservative business philosophy ... We've been remarkably stable through the [recession], and I think we are a much stronger company today than we were five years ago," he said.

* Image added by JWT.



Ed Yates of J.W. Townsend Landscaping. Photo/Nate Delesline III/The Daily Progress





CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Bill and Ann Tidball have created more than 40 acres of meadow on their property.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Dana Squire has converted her back field to native grasses and a large variety of wildflowers.

Week brings attention to pollinators' critical roles

Starting in 2007 following a vote by the U.S. Senate, National Pollinator Week has been celebrated across the country to bring attention to the plight of pollinating insects, including our bees, butterflies, moths and other species. While pollinators tend to be “out of sight, out of mind” for many of us, the fact is they actually play a major role in our lives. You see, pollinators are needed for the reproduction of approximately 70 percent of the world’s plant species, the species that provide us oxygen to breathe. More than two thirds of the world’s crops, including many grown locally here in Madison County, depend on these species as well and thus they have a direct, multi-billion dollar impact on our food supply. It is almost guaranteed that something you eat on your plate today, if not the majority of it, has been directly pollinated or benefited from the work of pollinators.

Unfortunately, many of our pollinators are in decline. We may have heard of the so-called Colony Collapse Disorder affecting our non-native European honey bees. However, while they may not get as much attention, our hundreds of native pollinators are of greater concern due to their roles in our natural ecosystems. In Virginia, species such as the Rusty Patch Bumble Bee and Yellow Banded Bumble Bee are just two of the imperiled bees. We also have vulnerable butterflies and moths such as the Diana Fritillary, Dukes’ Skipper, Early Hairstreak and Regal Fritillary. Class-wide, it is hard to get a clear picture as to why these invertebrate declines are occurring, but they have been blamed on a variety of issues from habitat loss and degradation especially, but also pesticide use, pollution and disease.

Thankfully, Madison County landowners are rising to the challenge. Dana Squire, a Master Naturalist, will tell you about one of the greatest enemies of pollinators, that being tall fescue. Squire says, “While I understand why fescue is grown for cattle production, in this area there is a lot of acreage

in fescue that is no longer used for this purpose. Fescue is of almost no use to any species other than cows. I’d really like to see us convert these areas not used for agricultural production back to a habitat that benefits more native species. That’s why I contacted you and asked for help in converting my fescue field to native warm season grasses and wildflowers.” And Squire has done just that, converting her back field to native grasses and a large variety of wildflowers, such as Partridge Pea and Coreopsis. Her meadow is now coming into year two. Squire says, “I’ve been thrilled by the changes. No longer a fescue monoculture, these fields are now defined by many different structures, textures, and colors of plant life. I already have so many more birds and pollinators than I’ve ever observed in the past, especially and most recently, several types of fritillaries.” Even with just four acres of meadow, she has done an abundance of good for the wildlife just outside the Town of Madison’s center.

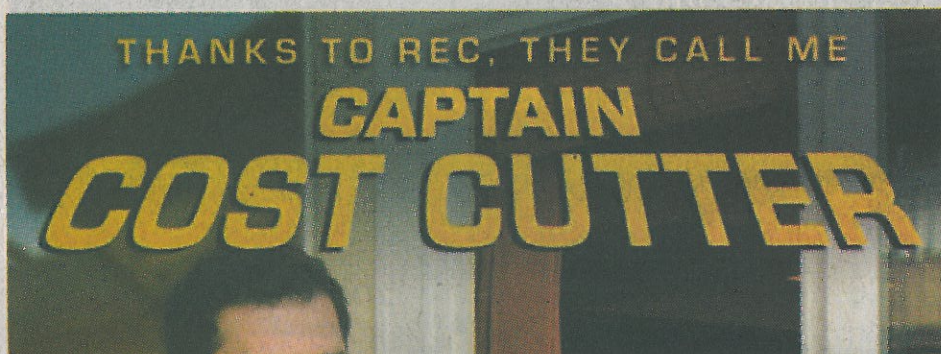
Like Dana Squire, Madison’s Bill and Ann Tidball say they have “declared war on the number one enemy of native grass and wildflowers: fescue grass.” They have planted over 18,000 native shortleaf pine species with the Virginia Department of Forestry and instead of typical commercial rates they have planted the trees “with a little distance between them to allow for a bit of under-growth for both food and protection for birds and animals.” They have also contracted with JW Townsend Landscaping out of Charlottesville to create over 40 acres of meadow on their property, featuring native Little Bluestem grass and a mix of wildflowers. In addition to the great benefits for pollinators, the Tidball project shows the benefits of this habitat type to other species. Bill will proudly tell you, “We had not heard the sound of a ‘bob-white!’ in more than two years. At the end of the first year a small covey of quail had taken up residence on our property. This spring every day we have enjoyed

the sound of many bobwhites, as it is obvious even more have found the new habitat and have moved in for nesting. We also routinely comment about the larger number of songbirds, and larger variety of them, that are evident around the house and we no longer fill the bird feeders! It is all about habitat!” Ultimately, as they enjoy the fruits of their labors, the Tidballs hope that others can become involved as well. “We feel very fortunate to live in an area so rich in beauty and natural resources and really hope to make a difference in preserving it. If successful perhaps it can serve as encouragement to others to recognize the value to society of preserving a bit of the natural beauty and rewards of Madison County’s bounty.”

More recently, Madison’s Roger and Kem Courtenay have become involved. Unlike Dana Squire and the Tidballs, their wildflower meadow project is just in the planning phases, but they have a long term goal that could apply to many landowners in the county. “We need to preserve and replenish regional ecosystems in all their aspects, and pollinators and wildlife habitat in general can help ensure health for many native plants, animals, humans included, increasing the potential for biological diversity on which our environment depends. Native plants dependent

on pollinators, and the pollinators themselves, are in short supply and have high ecological value here in Madison County, which continues to lose native meadow habitat.” The Courtenays are well on their way now, but the question is, are you?

This year for National Pollinator Week, let us all think of ways we can improve the habitat for these species that we depend on economically and ecologically. Whether you own a farm or are in more of a suburban setting, you can create habitat and you can benefit the pollinators, songbirds and maybe even the Northern Bobwhite quail. Thankfully, help is available. All three of the landowners listed in this article have taken advantage of wildlife technical assistance on their multi-acre properties that is available through the Virginia Quail Recovery Initiative, a partnership between the Virginia Tech Conservation Management Institute, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and Natural Resources Conservation Service. Financial assistance is also available through a variety of state and federal programs assuming land and participant eligibility requirements are met. For information, contact David Bryan, Private Lands Wildlife Biologist, at david.bryan@va.usda.gov or (804) 537-5225 ext. 119. Thanks in advance for your efforts!



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