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Meadows / Prairies

📅 April 9, 2011

I love meadows and prairies. Steve and I even created a small short-grass prairie in our back yard in Green Bay, WI some 15 years ago. These types of ecosystems have been disappearing from our landscape over the past 150 or so years due to agriculture and residential encroachment. More and more people need more and more homes and food to eat. Most meadows/prairies occur on level or gently rolling slopes that are also desirable spaced for growing food and... well... living.



Meadows and prairies are near and dear to my heart because I love their look and also their historic and ecological value. In fact, I've just finished a volunteer project designing a Pacific Northwest Garry Oak Ecosystem... the photo above is a Garry oak ecosystem. And I try to encourage any client with enough property (and one really doesn't need much space) to create a meadow (of some sort) if not solely to help the environment, but also to lessen their landscape maintenance obligation.

So it's been interesting that during the past week [Lawn Reform Coalition](#) made Facebook postings concerning meadows/prairies. The first one was by guest blogger, Rebecca Sweet called [How to Make a Mini Meadow](#) (the photo at right is from Sweet's article). The second one refers to a Washington Post article called [Create a Meadow Right Where You Live](#) by Joel M. Lerner.

Both articles are interesting, and I agree with a lot of the information. One thing I don't agree with is that it's necessary to start fresh—meaning nuking existing vegetation. If what is existing is shrubs or noxious, invasive weeds, yes, that is probably a good idea. But a turf-grass lawn or pasture is usually a satisfactory starting point.

One caution I have is the use of wildflower seed blends. One reason is that most blends aren't location specific. That means they contain flowers and grasses that may not be native (or otherwise appropriate) to where your meadow is to be situated. This is bad simply because one of the main benefits of a meadow/prairie/savannah is to provide a NATURAL ecosystem. It won't be natural to the area if it contains exotic plants—or ones that may be invasive where you live. Another reason is that most wildflowers are annuals, and if you have a meadow composed mostly of flowers, when they are done blooming, they die



leaving your meadow looking like a dead, brown, sad plot of weeds all winter. In the wild, meadows are closer to 3/4 grasses—or more. And usually, there are several types of grasses. And most of the grasses are perennials. A variety of the right grasses make a meadow look interesting all winter long. I particularly love little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*).

It's important to get the perennial grasses started BEFORE you add the wildflower seeds. I recommend starting the grasses at least 3 years before the addition of flowers. This is because in general, the foliage mass for flowers is much greater than it is for grasses, and so it produces shade which inhibits grass growth. You want a good crop of grass, then start scattering the flower seeds. I like scattering flower seeds on a windy day. Just toss a handful of seeds into the air and let Mother Nature scatter them as she sees fit. Your meadow will look much more natural using this method. And yes, using a variety of seeds is great. One seed source I particularly like is: [High Country Gardens](#).

In her article, Rebecca Sweet mentions insects. This is one of a meadow's great benefits. It harbors insects that serve as food for other insects and animals. And once there are flowers, you will have bees, butterflies and hummingbirds... pollinators! Living in the PNW, I am particularly interested in Garry oak savannah ecosystems... their demise and restoration. Few ecosystems are as biologically diverse as this one; supporting a multitude of birds, reptiles & amphibians, small mammals as well as hundreds of insects.

Read more about the importance of meadow/prairie/savannah ecosystems:

- [Garry Oak Ecosystems](#)
- [Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Teams](#)
- [Garry Oak Gardener's Handbook](#) — download free book

Here are some good books creating meadows and prairies in our own backyard small spaces.

- [Bringing Nature Home](#) by Douglas Tallamy (Timber Press, 2007)
- [Natural Gardening in Small Spaces](#) by Noel Kingbury (Timber Press, 2003)
- [Prairie-Style Gardens](#) by Lynn M. Steiner (Timber Press, 2010)
- [Urban & Suburban Meadows](#) by Catherine Zimmerman (Matrix Media Press, 2010)

📖 [Design & Plant Selection, Sustainability, Wow, More Stuff!](#) @ [permalink \[http://goodnightdesign.com/meadows-prairies-2/\]](http://goodnightdesign.com/meadows-prairies-2/)

Comments

Meadows / Prairies — 2 Comments

Steve
on May 26, 2011 at 11:05 am said:

This is great

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