

# Making Meadows



**What if you just let your grass grow? You'd save time, money, and fossil fuel. Add some native wildflowers to your burgeoning meadow and you'd create a thriving habitat for bees, butterflies, and songbirds. Many animals and insects native to our region are completely dependent on meadow habitat and are losing ground to development. Even small backyard meadows can offer critical food and shelter for struggling species.**



Meadow at Bryn Coed Preserve



Pollinator meadow at Green Hills Preserve

## skip the snip.

The easiest way to convert a portion of lawn to meadow is simply to mow only once or twice a year. Often the best areas to convert are those that are difficult to mow such as wet or steep areas. Other ideal locations include transition areas between turf and woodlands, stream corridors, and areas underutilized for family recreation.

Initially, your new meadow will be composed of the species that originally made up the lawn: usually non-native cool-season grass species such as Kentucky bluegrass, fescues, and ryes. With time, the vegetation will begin to diversify. Native warm-season grasses—such as little and big bluestem and purpletop—will begin to appear. Wildflowers will follow. Species such as goldenrod, asters, black-eyed Susan, daisy, yarrow, and purple coneflower are common, spreading by seed from local plants or dropped by birds and other wildlife.

## meadow maintenance.

Mow your meadow at least once a year to keep it from reverting to a forest, but, remember, timing is everything. Mowing between April 1 and early July is detrimental to wildlife; it removes nesting cover, destroys nests and eggs, and kills young birds and animals. Similarly, mowing between mid-July and late-October does not allow the vegetation enough time to renew itself before winter, so it won't offer food and cover for wildlife until the following spring. Mowing between March 1 and April 1 is ideal. Set your mower deck to a height of eight to 12 inches.

Keep an eye out for invasive plants that can quickly take over your meadow. Eliminate invasives by spot mowing, selective spraying with an herbicide, or manual or mechanical pulling. Use only aquatic approved herbicides within 50 feet of streams.

To communicate that a meadow is intentional and managed, maintain a mowed turf swath as a sharp edge around the edges and—if your meadow is large enough—consider incorporating a trail network so you (and your senses) can get closer to the action.

grass  
isn't green.



Americans spend approximately \$30 billion every year to maintain more than 32 million acres of lawn—an area roughly the size of Pennsylvania. We pour 270 billion gallons of water per week on our lawns and apply 10 times more fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides than farmers use on their crops. A typical 3.5-horsepower gas lawn mower emits about the same quantity of volatile organic compounds in one hour as a car driven 340 miles. On top of that, the EPA estimates that we spill 17 million gallons of fuel each year filling our mowers—more than the Exxon Valdez oil spill.



## benefits of a meadow.



### a win for wildlife.

Over the last century, changes in agricultural technology and loss of land to development have caused a decline in the quantity and quality of grasslands for wildlife. In particular, these changes have threatened the survival of birds—such as Eastern Meadowlark, Bobolink, and Grasshopper Sparrow—that depend on large (25 acres plus) meadows. While small meadows will not provide breeding habitat for these threatened species, they do provide important resting and feeding areas along their migratory pathways. And you'll get to enjoy the sight of avian species such as Red-wing Blackbird, American Goldfinch, Eastern Bluebird, and various swallows and sparrows that are far less likely to frequent a manicured lawn.



Bobolink at Stroud Preserve

### beneficial bugs.

Many beneficial pollinators, such as bees, beetles, and butterflies—are currently at risk due to loss of habitat and pesticide use. These insects—which thrive in meadow habitat—are essential to the production of three-quarters of all the crops humans eat and for 90 percent of all flowering plants in the world.

Beneficial pollinators have very basic habitat requirements: flowers to forage on, host plants to lay their eggs on, and an environment free of pesticides. Grasslands and wildflower meadows offer these essentials in spades.



Monarch butterfly at Gwynedd Preserve

### visual appeal.

Meadows offer a sensory experience every season of the year. A meadow of tall, waving grass is a beautiful site on a breezy June day. In mid-summer, it is literally abuzz with activity. There is much to observe: a bird looking for a meal, bees flying from flower to flower, the iridescence of a butterfly, or the steady chatter of crickets. Many meadow wildflowers persist into fall and attract songbirds who feast on seed heads. Even in winter, the dried stalks of meadow grasses and flowers are striking.



Pollinator meadow at Bryn Coed Preserve

**Given the myriad of benefits to replacing turf with meadow, it's certainly worth considering. A few seasons of observing the flourishing new habitat, and you'll never look at turf the same again.**



Native plants at Stoneleigh: a natural garden

### get inspired.

Come see this process in action at Natural Lands' Stoneleigh: a natural garden, where the team has allowed several acres of lawn to begin its journey back to meadow—simply by only mowing it once a year. **For hours and directions, visit [stoneleighgarden.org](http://stoneleighgarden.org).**