

Tired of Lawn? Try Meadows!

by Kelsi Potterf

Perhaps when you think of a meadow you imagine an area that looks a bit like a prairie, a secluded opening in the forest, or a flowering oasis in the desert. With meadowscaping, you can create and enjoy a beautiful ecological landscape close to home and you do not need a lot of room to do it.

We are thinking more and more about lawns and how much work they entail, how much water they use, and maybe even chemical use too. Heritage Gardens of the Columbia Basin, a program developed by the Benton Conservation District to provide free water-wise, native-plant landscape planning services to interested landowners, has been working to educate our community about this landscaping style.

Though the lawns are the most irrigated ‘crop’ in the U.S., You can never harvest anything from them and what is ‘harvested’ is immediately sent to the landfill or composting facility. There are places where conventional lawns can provide great spaces for people and pets, or provide a desirable manicured aesthetic, but relying on it as the default landscaping style has been costly. In terms of biodiversity and drought tolerance, they include a few short, shallow-rooted grasses and several ‘sneaky weeds’ that we spend our money, water, and energy maintaining and less of our time physically enjoying. Here, form reinforces function; the few plant species are visited by fewer pollinators and other wildlife species,” says Kelsi Potterf, Resource Conservationist at the Benton Conservation District.

Meadowscapes, on the other hand, use flowers and typically bunchgrasses to create a bit of a wildish garden. It is designed using mostly native plants, or nearly so, that will grow well in our climate and soils without much help. By doing so, you will be building a micro-habitat to provide food and dwellings that birds and bees have been asking for, and if you create it, they will come!

Now is a great time to begin planning and preparing your very own meadow and we want to give you some tips and one of the most important is planning and preparing your very own meadow.



Without getting too much ‘into the weeds,’ we have a few tips for getting started with a successful meadowscape installation:

Know your neighbors: HOAs and city codes may limit what you are and aren’t allowed to do on the areas of your property in public view, and like any landscaping renovation, the process can be a bit messy. Communicating with interested parties and neighbors regarding your intent is key to gaining community support.

Make it look intentional: Start small and avoid using too many plants that grow taller than 3 ft.; on smaller lots, use smaller plants. Keep edges clean, pathways mowed, and the area free of wind-blown debris (e.g., trash). You can also ‘frame’ the space with maintained or sparsely planted rock borders, place small pollinator/wildlife habitat signs, or get it certified as a Heritage Garden by the Program.

Location, location, location: It is important to find the right site for your project. Choose a mostly sunny spot, perhaps in a corner of your lawn, or maybe all along one side to create a border meadow. While these plant communities are certainly less maintenance, in our urban/suburban landscape, all plantings require some maintenance. Be sure to select a location where taller vegetation won’t get ‘out-of-hand’ frequently or where all maintenance will be too challenging.

Timing your preparation and seeding: Fall is the best time to seed with native plants, so now is the time to start thinking about how to get rid of some of that lawn. This can be achieved in several ways:

One of the easiest is to lay down some black plastic to block the sun. Be sure to use some weights around the edges to keep it down. By fall, it should be free of your old lawn. Prepare the soil for seeding by loosening the soil with a rake and remove excess plant material to ensure good seed-to-soil contact for germination.

For species that prefer more soil moisture and organic matter, Another way is to layer cardboard, leaves, grass clippings, and newspaper to ‘lasagna’ layer materials. Top it off with a layer or two of straw, compost, more leaves, etc. Add a little moisture occasionally to help break down that mass. In the fall, simply use some topsoil over the top if needed, and you will be ready to plant.

Herbicides are available capable of killing lawn, but caution should be used to do this properly. Please read labels carefully and/or seek advice from a pesticide application professional before you decide to use these products. Do this early in the season to reduce the potential damage of lingering herbicide on your germinating seeds.

‘Instant meadows’ are possible if you are low on time and have the resources to do so. This would require renting or hiring someone with a sod cutter, a robust garden tiller and someone to pick out the chunks, or a particularly motivated individual with a pick and shovel. Avoid waiting too long to plant or leave exposed soil when you notice weed seeds blowing in the wind.

September is a good time to seed and/or plant plugs, bare roots, or container plants. If you would like to seed annuals or plant 1–3-year-old plants in the spring, this should be done as early in the season as possible, and plan to irrigate during dry periods.

Have some patience: Potterf illustrates - “With these plantings, it is so interesting and exciting to watch the change over time, and you do have to be patient.” Longtime meadowscaping practitioners say, ‘The first year they sleep, the second year they creep, and the third year they LEAP!’ Few things will draw you outside on a gloomy spring morning to see who is sprouting or keep you coming back every day to check on who is your next to bloom.” The first spring after seeding, you will see blooms on annuals and small grass starts, but the perennials might take longer to establish and bloom. Hopefully you have selected some plants that will re-seed themselves, thus creating the continuing meadow effect.

Do some research or seek technical support: *So, I have seen bags of ‘Pacific Northwest Wildflower Mix’ at the store... will that work?* It depends on what you are going for. Some of these species are not native to our area and can become a nuisance (e.g., California poppy) or will end up needing the same number of resources as your lawn did (e.g., gayfeather). Some mixes may include species that have some toxicity for pets or livestock; this is not to say they should not be used but do take care not to try and establish a plant that can take over your neighbor’s irrigated pasture, for example. You can buy mixes to create meadows with more species that are indigenous to our region, but you can also add to these with some of your favorites or create the whole mix yourself.

You have an opportunity to be an artist—with bare ground as your canvas and seeds your paintbrush, don’t be afraid to get creative. Searching photos of meadowscapes will give you many ideas, “though it is important to understand many of these images are not from meadows in our area, and by replicating them exactly in your yard, you could end up with a landscape that needs more water, nutrients, and care than you are willing to give it or it may not provide the wildlife benefits you were hoping for. “Learning about native plants and how to install and maintain them can feel overwhelming because it is a bit different than what we have been taught or observed growing up, but that is what the Heritage Garden Program and the Conservation Districts are here for!”

This is a great project to get the kids involved with, nothing draws children out of the house than a trail beckoning them to explore something with a bit more wildness. There are so many opportunities to learn about the many pollinators as well as predator insects such as ladybird beetles, lacewings, and praying mantids. New birds will visit the meadow so be prepared with a set of binoculars, maybe a comfy chair,



and a good bird book to help with identification and to learn more about your new feathered friends.

We hope you will find a little spot and make this the beginning of a new, colorful experience in your yard. If you are interested and would like advice on how to start, feel free to reach out to the Yakima County Heritage Garden Program Coordinator, the native plant liaison at your local Master Gardener Program, or visit the Heritage Garden website (www.hgcd.info) for access to a variety of resources. The Yakima Master Gardeners will be hosting a Meadowscaping talk by Kelsi Potterf at the Ahtanum Youth Park Demonstration Garden Saturday, May 27th at 10 am—come and join the discussion and see the garden's beautiful blooms!

For any gardening questions - you are always welcome to contact our Master Gardener Clinic at 509-574-1604 or email gardener@co.yakima.wa.us.