



# Meadows: The Low-Care Lawn

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**N**o matter how well you like your mower, no one wishes they could spend more time mowing lawn. Why not rethink your current landscape plan? Replace high-maintenance lawn and garden areas with easy-care native meadow patches. In sizes from 1,000 square feet to several acres, native grasses and wildflowers can help you create a beautiful, low maintenance landscape and reclaim recreational hours.

## First Steps

The first step is to evaluate your site. It is easier to match native plants to your existing site conditions than to change your site. Wildflowers will thrive on the type of site that best matches that where they are naturally found. Just as wildlife requires food, water and cover, native plants require certain basics for survival (sun, water and soil). Will direct sunlight be available to the plant for the full day, part of the day, or not at all? Is the area low lying where water collects or is it located in a high dry spot? Does the soil drain quickly after a rain, or does it tend to hold moisture? These evaluative steps and perhaps a soil test--will help you select native plants that will thrive on your site.

Next, select the species for your site. For blooms throughout the growing season, use plants with varied bloom times. Grasses alone can provide a dramatic color palette of greens in spring and summer to tawny golds or rusty red in the fall and winter. Different heights and types of seedheads add interest with movement and texture. Grasses are also important to provide support for tall wildflowers. Butterflies and hummingbirds will be attracted to the food source of nectar-rich wildflowers. Consider how you'll view the native planting. Will the site be viewed from a distance, or up close? Should you plant concentrated groups of single species for bold splashes of color, or a randomly scattered mixture as in a prairie meadow? By considering all aspects you will create a well-planned landscape that will provide you hours of enjoyment, reduce your maintenance and increase the value of your property.

## Prepare, plant & water

All native seed mixes establish best if planted on areas that have no green vegetation at time of seeding. You can cover a small area with black plastic for about two months between late fall and spring to kill existing vegetation without the use of chemical herbicides, but plants that do not actively grow at this time may not be killed. Herbiciding with glyphosate gives more dependable results, especially if two applications are used. The area should have four to six inches of active growth so spring and fall are best.

If there is a layer of dead thatch over most of the seedbed, the area should be burned or mowed and raked so the seed will be able to make contact with the soil. Pressing the seeds into the surface is acceptable, but covering them will reduce germination rate. Firm the seedbed by rolling or packing the surface.

Unless you are planting on an agricultural scale, tilling the soil is not advised. Soil tilling can stir up dormant weed seeds and extra work for you in the maintenance phase before your native plants are established.

The best time to apply native wildflower seed is late November to mid February; native grass seed can be planted in early spring until mid-May. Native grass seeds germinate best when soil temperatures warm to at least 65 degrees F. Sow the grass seed in early spring through summer. Earlier is better to take advantage of spring rains. Small areas can be hand-watered lightly and frequently to prevent the top of the soil from drying out. When the grass is about an inch tall, decrease the frequency and increase the depth of watering. You can stop adding water once the grass is established.

## Cover Crops & Soil Amendments

If you're ready to take action before the proper time to plant your native seed, plant a cover crop of

cereal rye grain or oats. This is entirely different than rye grass for lawns. Traditionally, farmers used cover crops before chemical fertilizers came along. These economical, non-invasive crops offer erosion control and can be plowed under to add nutrients.

Sow your cover crop at 60-95 pounds per acre between July 15 and September 5. A hard fall freeze will kill the oats before they set seed. Hand seed your native seed mix into the standing oats in late October. Do not rake or drag the seed into the soil. Frost action will help the native seed work into the soil. The dead oat plants will provide mulch that both aids spring germination and helps prevent soil erosion. Areas larger than one acre can be planted into the standing oats using a seed drill with a no-till attachment.

Native wildflowers and grasses usually require no fertilizer to establish, however Critical Site Products (Critsite) does endorse use of soil conditioners and inoculants for best results. Critsite recommends the use of five bulk pounds of granular mycorrhizae in the no-till drill mixed direct with the seed when performing large acreage native prairie restorations. We also use this rate in some of our seed production fields. Granular inoculant helps restore beneficial soil organisms and can be applied any time of the year.

### **Weedlings, Seedlings & Maintenance**

Wildflowers and grasses planted from seed spend the first year, and sometimes three or more years, sinking their extensive root systems into the soil. For this reason, you might not see a lot of top growth right away when starting from seed. Be patient. These large root systems are what sustain the plants through drought and harsh winters. If you are seeking quicker results, consider using Critsite's deep cell native plugs or a combination of native plugs and seed.

During your site's first growing season, your planting should be kept mowed to a height of six to 10 inches high. This prevents weeds from shading native plant seedlings or from setting seed. Don't

worry about cutting the native seedlings, but do mow often to prevent a build-up of cuttings which can smother the young plants. During your second growing season, one mowing at a height of six to 12 inches in late spring or early summer will control remaining weeds and should be the last weed control mowing needed.

Hand weeding during the second and third growing seasons will make a big difference in your planting. Other control options are clipping weeds near the ground with pruning shears, carefully spot-applying herbicide to individual weeds or a controlled burn.

### **There's gotta be an easier way**

If you seek quicker results, try Critsite's native deep cell plugs (DCP) or a combination of our native plugs and seed. Our "Prairie Panorama" mix is especially suited for enhancing with DCPs and can save you years in achieving the look you want. The Prairie Panorama mix can be planted on a prepared site and then overplanted later in spring with the wildflower DCPs that will bloom in a show-stopping display of beautiful colors and textures spring through fall from their first season.

Let Critsite help you select the right approach for *your* landscape. You'll enjoy a low-maintenance natural landscape with a place for butterflies and birds and recreating your own slice of Midwestern prairie.

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