

HOME-GARDEN

Gardening Central Mass.: Meadows a moment in time to appreciate

Steven Conaway Special to the Telegram & Gazette USA TODAY NETWORK

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Meadows are open landscapes, composed of grasses and wildflowers. The word "meadow" itself is evocative, conjuring images of Julie Andrews twirling in the Alps or bucolic, rolling farmers' fields. Meadows can be grand sprawling vistas, but they can also occupy smaller clearings or even replace turf lawns at the home scale.

In most New England landscapes, a meadow is largely a forest interrupted. These open spaces are typically created and maintained by ecological disturbances: fire, flooding or pest outbreaks. These forces clear out woody plants and trees, creating space for fast-growing, sun-loving pioneer species to take root. Repeated grazing by animals, seasonal weather events or intervention by people keep these areas open and free of trees, allowing for a wider diversity of grassland plants to spread and proliferate. In time, perennial meadow plants will establish a stronghold and in the same successional fashion start to shade out the fast-growing plants that first colonized the freshly opened landscape. Left unchecked, open areas would slowly revert to forest. But with repeated disturbances, whether by nature or by thoughtful human stewardship, meadows remain allowing a diverse community of grasses and wildflowers to thrive. The transitional nature of meadows as evolving landscapes means that every time you come across them, they are a moment in time to appreciate.

A diverse, sociable community of plants is a theme of successful meadows. Naturally occurring meadow species have evolved to grow interspersed with plant companions occupying different layers in space. They often perform best with

buddies to lean on that keep them from flopping over as they reach for the sky. New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill stewards many expansive meadows that frame the views of the Wachusett Reservoir and our historic apple orchard. One of my favorite meadow moments right now is a perfect display of that layered tapestry construction. In a thoughtfully planted parking lot island, golden September light dances through waving seed heads of yellow prairie grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) contrasted with deep purple New York iron weed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*). The low niches between them hum with bees attending the vivid yellow blooms of partridge pea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*). Goldenrods (*Solidago* spp.), milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.), and a drift of little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) are woven throughout, dotting wherever there is open space.

The abundance and richness afforded by meadows is most evident this time of year when a chorus of crickets and grasshoppers are singing, pollinators flit about masses of late summer blooms, and plants sway under the weight of birds hopping to seed clusters, collecting newly ripening morsels. Open meadows also create rich wildlife habitat along their edges. Dense shrubs and thickets that form in the transition to forests are an excellent food and shelter source for birds and mammals.

Open grasslands now occupy only a small percentage of Massachusetts' land area, and these spaces are the primary habitat for many rare plant species and imperiled wildlife, meaning that growing and encouraging meadow spaces is more important than ever.

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Conventional gardening instincts of cultivating individual plants and setting them in tidy rows or blocks can be forgotten when tending a meadow. Successful meadows of any size require dense, self-seeding and perennial vegetation dynamically competing and cohabitating. Garden practices like weeding and planting still have their place but take the form of guidance and encouragement on the path to building a particular plant community. Stewarding a meadow involves

tipping the ecological scales in favor of certain plant groups over others. This is often accomplished with well-timed interventions. Mowing, for example, is a powerful tool. Cut too early, and you might prevent desirable plants from setting seed. Wait too long, and woody species could gain a foothold. Removing seed heads from aggressive annuals can help slower-growing perennials establish themselves.

Meadows remind us that beauty and abundance can come from balance. They are places where disturbance and renewal meet, where diversity flourishes precisely because no single species dominates. While cultivating and caring for meadows, whether on a broad hillside or in a modest corner of a garden, we practice that balance and in doing so, we preserve living landscapes that offer moments of seasonal wonder and habitat with its own unique rhythms.

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.