

Are you seriously considering installing a pollinator garden or meadow in the near future? Well, there's no better time than this fall and winter to select, prepare and plan your site. Following are some thoughts to help you on your way or reinforce what you're already doing.

Site Selection :

Thoughtful realism in selecting your pollinator garden or meadow site is a critically important first step. A garden site of a few hundred square feet or a meadow site of one to three acres, formerly in lawn or cleared pasture, with room for future growth, is ideal. Full sun and good drainage are optimal characteristics, as they provide much flexibility in native grass and plant selection. That said, one site we developed has areas of both moderate (mesic) and abundant (hydric) moisture, combined with sunny and shaded areas, allowing for more options. The key is to work within the physical conditions your site presents- after all, you're trying to create a native ecosystem approximating what may have been in place years or decades before!

On that note, we're not further addressing soil types or conditions, or testing; virtually all native grasses and plants are accustomed to growing in low-fertility conditions. And if you purchase your seed from reputable suppliers like Ernst or Roundstone, you'll find that the seed is specifically suited to growing conditions in our area.

Returning to the notion of ' thoughtful realism,' selecting a site that has room for future expansion is ideal, especially if your site is bordered by woods, where you might considering intermediate cover providing transition to your meadow area. But starting small on a scale that's realistically manageable for you, your available time and equipment, is very important.

Site Preparation :

Whether you're developing a 400 - square foot pollinator garden on a former lawn/ grassy area or a meadow on an acre or more in former pasture land, your challenge in developing your meadow site will be in managing (notice that we didn't say " eliminating") the existing warm-weather vegetation and its seedbank, while sufficiently disturbing the soil for planting.

First things first. Reduce competing vegetation: As an initial step, you should reduce as much existing vegetation through mowing or bush-hogging as possible, ideally now as we near the end of the warm-weather growing season. This activity can then be followed by an initial treatment with a glyphosate- based spray, which has comparatively lower residuality, but sufficient strength to treat fescue and related vegetation

For those of you who have reservations about spraying, we share those reservations, but nonetheless advocate the use of spraying in site preparation, assuming proper use, and limiting spraying to the minimum necessary. By this we mean 1) following all instructions provided by the manufacturer; 2) limiting spray strength and application rates; and 3) properly planning spraying activities to account for environmental conditions, including pollinator and wildlife impacts and weather conditions.

For most grassed or former pasture sites, assuming that you're planning to seed/plant next spring, two site preparation sprays, one in the fall/winter and another in spring as warm weather vegetation emerges, should be sufficient.

On larger sites (an acre or more), if you don't have your own equipment, we recommend using an outside vendor. If you're planning to use a meadow development contractor (a topic for a future " musing"), the contractor can provide assistance in planning and executing spray operations. An important lesson we learned is that local agricultural cooperatives, while certainly competent in spraying operations, do not have equipment that properly scales to small acreage sites, for which ATVs mounted with small-boom sprayers are better suited. If you don't presently own and don't have reason to invest in such equipment, you're better off to retain the services of a landscaping or meadow development contractor.

In site preparation for larger areas, you should also give attention to vegetation surrounding your site. This is a good time to remove woody vegetation, including non-native invasives, *Elaeagnus umbellata* (autumn olive) and *Ailanthus altissima* (tree-of-heaven), and prolific woody growth such as North American native *Gleditsia triachanthos* (honey locust), that could become unwelcome invaders.

Next Steps Planning: Finally, if you are planning to seed/plant next spring, now is an important time to plan seed/ plant selection, and retain any needed contractor support. Remember that if your plans call for engaging a contractor for cultivation/seeding, many of these same contractors support local area farmers during spring planting season, and those farmers will likely have first priority.

So there are the basics of site selection and preparation. In a future issue, we'll address site development and maintenance considerations, especially in your first growing season. Until then, happy meadowing!!