

# What is a Meadow?

Susan Abraham  
Conservation Landscapes  
February, 2019



*Prairies, meadows, savannahs, oh my!  
Transitional, perpetual, cultural - how to decide?  
Wet, dry, forested or sloped; the options are many...  
Tall grass, short grass, flowering plants all;  
Meadows abound with spring beauty  
Then autumn - blazing in the fall.*

Piedmont **Meadows** come in many shapes and sizes; they are rich environments for our native wildlife, as well as pastoral respites for our species. Whether you convert acres of property into meadow, or create a corner pocket meadow, a buffer meadow strip, a meadowscape – even a ‘meadow in a pot’ – all are opportunities to host a diversity of wildlife and support native flora and fauna on a variety of available soil.



All meadows require a **minimum level of care**, or the site will experience exotic species invasion as it struggles to become the dominant Piedmont environment: a deciduous forest. Indigenous peoples were *Transitional* meadow masters, harvesting the energy of fire to create rich forest edge conditions where they hunted deer, rabbits, and other prey species, and harvested edible forbs found in the diverse plant communities of the meadow. Today we can replicate their processes and create these important habitats where raptors soar above to hunt, birds forage and pollinators abound.

There are a few **mandatory conditions** that define a meadow in the Piedmont of Virginia:

- A meadow is a temporary opening in the forest
  - In our region, most lands will revert to a deciduous forest without intervention
- Meadows are composed of less than 10% woody plants (shrubs, trees)
- Meadows are dominated by native grassland species

Meadow **establishment** exists on a ‘spectrum’ of interventions, from a near passive strategy such as a ‘timed’ mowing regimen, to an intensive preparation strategy: eradicate existing vegetation and introduce native plants via plug and seed distribution. Between these (2) approaches exist a variety of strategies to introduce native plants to compete with existing turf and/or exotic plant species.

All meadows go through a series of **development phases**, with a *minimum* of (3) years to establish a level of maturity. We might think of the first year as the meadow’s infancy – it is dependent and requires a nurturing hand. The second year is a meadow’s adolescent – plants may have growth spurts in the manner of ‘*elbows and knees*’ as grasses and forbs sprout on different timelines. A meadow begins to show its true character in its 3<sup>rd</sup> year of growth, much like a young adult pursuing independence.

It is important to understand the level of **resource investment** you are willing to make, over time, to create and manage the rich environment of a meadow. Once you establish this key baseline, you can plan appropriate tasks for each season of your meadow’s life cycle.



## Meadow Making

The following plan is *one example* of a meadow creation/management strategy.



### First Year

#### Spring

- Delineate meadow border or edge
- Mow delineated meadow 2-4" height
- Mowing regimen:
  - Mow every 4 weeks
  - Ideally 12 – 18" height
    - Mowing removes exotic plant seed heads
    - Allows native plants to dominate seed bank over time
- Succession islands: scalp mow (1) or more islands or plots for new native plants
  - Plant plugs, quarts, gallons of native grasses + forbs in these islands
  - Cast native plant seed mix over any disturbed soil
    - Roll or tamp seeds for good soil contact
    - Lightly mulch or straw over seed to discourage birds

#### Summer

- Stop mowing when 'summer heat' arrives (generally in July)

#### Fall

- Plant more plugs, quarts, gallons of native grasses + forbs in islands

#### Late Winter

- Mow low 4" height
- Rake off all cut debris from meadow



## Second Year

### Spring

- Mowing regimen
  - Mow twice this second spring season
  - Ideally 8-12” height
    - Removes exotic plant seed heads
    - Allows native plants to dominate seed bank over time
- Succession islands: scalp mow (1) or more islands or plots for new native plants
  - Plant plugs, quarts, gallons of native grasses + forbs in these islands
  - Cast native plant seed mix over any disturbed soil
    - Roll or tamp seeds for good soil contact
    - Lightly mulch or straw over seed to discourage birds

### Summer

- Stop mowing when ‘summer heat’ arrives (generally in July)

### Fall

- Plant more plugs, quarts, gallons of native grasses + forbs in islands

### Late Winter

- Mow low 4” height
- Rake off all cut debris from meadow



## Third Year

### Spring

- Mowing regimen
  - Mow once this spring season
  - Ideally 8-12” height
    - Removes exotic plant seed heads
    - Allows native plants to dominate seed bank over time
- Succession islands: scalp mow (1) or more islands or plots for new native plants
  - Plant plugs, quarts, gallons of native grasses + forbs in these islands
  - Cast native plant seed mix over any disturbed soil
    - Roll or tamp seeds for good soil contact
    - Lightly mulch or straw over seed to discourage birds

### Summer

- Stop mowing when ‘summer heat’ arrives (generally July)

### Fall

- Plant more plugs, quarts, gallons of native grasses + forbs in islands

### Late Winter

- Burn meadow after 3<sup>rd</sup> season of growth:
  - Mow meadow perimeter for fire brake
  - Mow a series of firebreaks through meadow, perpendicular to prevailing winds (NW?)
  - Stage all safety equipment and materials
  - Burn according to all County Open Burn guidelines

## Resources

- ‘*Garden Revolution*’ by Larry Weaner
- Ernst Conservation Seeds <https://www.ernstseed.com/resources/planting-guides/life-cycle-of-a-meadow>
- VADCR Natural Communities <http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/natural-communities>
- Useful Meadow definitions <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meadow>