

15 NATIVE PLANT + BUTTERFLY PAIRINGS

NORTHERN GARDENER



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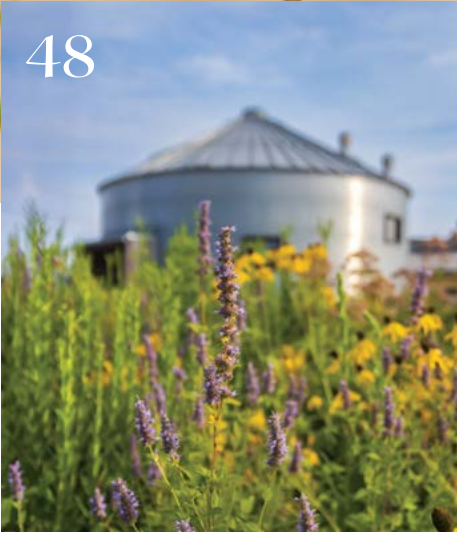


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A Peck's skipper (*Polites peckius*) pauses on a purple *Allium* bloom, sipping nectar and quietly doing the work that keeps our gardens and planet thriving.
Photo by Tracy Walsh Photography

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BUTTERFLY: EMILIE SNELL-ROOD | BANG BREWING AND NATIVE SEEDS: TRACY WALSH PHOTOGRAPHY | ILLUSTRATION: JAMIE MILLER

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FOR MORE INFORMATION



BIODIVERSITY—think of it not as a buzzword but as a living, working strategy for resilient gardens and a healthy planet. While our gardens provide us with food and flowers, they're also home to a complex network of countless critters, from bacteria to birch trees.

I hope this issue encourages you to see gardens not just as a personal sanctuary, but as part of a larger living network—one deeply affected by what we plant, how we mow, what we leave standing, what we let reseed and what we choose to give space. A truly thriving garden is an intricate network of relationships, not a collection of specimens. We're making a case for diverse plantings that support birds, beneficial insects and pollinators across the whole season. These pages are rooted in the importance of balancing the joy of planting what we love and the responsibility of choosing well.

Read on to beef up on the basics in our Native Plants Primer, find practical tips for sourcing plants and learn how to grow your own from seed (yes, you can—especially with a little cold-stratification magic). For inspiration beyond the backyard, we visit a St. Paul microbrewery's prairie rain garden and shine a light on larger scale rewilding efforts on public land. Don't miss our meadowscaping tips that prove you can go a little wild and still look wonderfully intentional.

Here's to a fresh, new season of planting with purpose and welcoming back the many beautiful elements that make a garden truly thrive.



Rebecca Swee
Rebecca Swee, Editor in Chief
 editor@northerngardener.org

P.S. Did you notice our new cover look? We're kicking off the new season with a refreshed Northern Gardener logo!

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SCAN TO LEARN MORE



A NOTE from the DIRECTOR

ESTABLISHED IN 1866, just eight years after Minnesota became a state, Minnesota State Horticultural Society (MSHS) was trying to answer practical questions. What will survive our winters? What fruit can we grow? How do we share what we're learning with neighbors across a young, spread-out state? Our founders experimented, compared notes and paid close attention to what worked.

It's also important to note that long before Minnesota became a state, indigenous communities had already developed rich, place-based food systems here, shaped by deep knowledge of land, water and seasons. That knowledge didn't disappear with statehood, and it continues to offer important lessons about resilience, stewardship and how we live well in our northern climate.

Over the decades, MSHS has grown and shifted along with Minnesota itself. Early members focused heavily on growing fruits and hardy trees. Later generations expanded into ornamental gardening, public landscapes, community education and the simple but powerful idea that gardening should be for everyone. Garden clubs became, and remain, a core part of that work, creating local places across Minnesota where gardeners learn from one another and strengthen their communities. Through wars, economic downturns and profound shifts in how people live, work and connect to the land, MSHS has stayed focused on helping people grow successfully in the North.



Lara Lau-Schommer,
Executive Director, MSHS



MSHS COMMUNITY OUTREACH PROGRAMS are generously supported by

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COMPANION PLANTING

The final installment in our Gardening for Soil Health series is here! Learn how placing ideal plants together can boost your soil's health.

Learn more at northerngardener.org/school



Celebrate spring's arrival at our annual Garden Gala fundraising event! Learn more at northerngardener.org/garden-gala

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Find gardening-related events across the Upper Midwest. Bookmark the full calendar online – updated weekly! northerngardener.org/calendar

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Bursting...

After a long winter, cold-climate plants and gardeners alike are ready to grow.



PHOTO: TRACY WALSH PHOTOGRAPHY

CABIN CONTAINERS

Easy, breezy patio pots for the lake

PG. 10

WHORLED MILKWEED

A dainty prairie native with needle-fine foliage

PG. 14

GET NATIVES

How and where to source these powerhouse plants

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SLOW MOW SUMMER

Rethinking best mowing practices

PG. 18



Cabin Containers

Sporadic visits and inconsistent TLC call for low-maintenance plants that will thrive at the lake or in the woods—with or without you.

STORY AND ILLUSTRATIONS
JAMIE MILLER



ONE OF THE PERKS OF NORTHERN LIVING? Thousands of forests and freshwater lakes and the countless cozy cabins nestled in and beside them that we love to frequent all summer long.

But patio pots can be tough enough to manage on a daily basis out your back door, let alone when left to fend for themselves during long work weeks and in the hands of fickle, fair-weather caretakers. As the lakes thaw, the anticipation of the familiar northbound march to cabin country gleams. This time-honored Midwest tradition of opening up the cabin for campfires, canoeing, summer swims and smores is always such a thrill. While we sweep away last year's dust both inside and out, readying the space for summer fun, adding the charm and color of our favorite flowers is definitely a favorite activity for so many northern gardeners.

Before potting up porch or patio plantings, think about what this season might bring. What are your container goals? Fun and whimsy? Food and color? Drought and deer resistance? From infrequent watering to sporadic deadheading, there's no doubt cabin containers can take a beating between visits. But these container designs embrace the neglect and help keep those cabin pots looking great all season long.

THREE CONTAINER STYLES

For Full or Partial Sun



1



2



3

Deer- & drought-resistant

Combine a climbing thriller (*Mandevilla*), classic filler (geranium) and a trailing spiller (*Sedum*) for a combo that won't be devoured by deer, can tolerate some neglect and will provide color all season. All are drought tolerant and forgiving, and both geranium and *Mandevilla* bloom all summer and come in a variety of flower colors, including pink, red, white and coral. They require simple trellising to climb—3- to 4-foot bamboo stakes and twine work well. Vibrant green clumps of needle stonecrop sedum cascade over the container edge all season long.

TIP: Each fall, gently dig out geranium roots, place in a paper bag and store in a cool, dark place that does not dip below 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Repot indoors in late winter or early spring, place in a sunny window, water and repot outdoors after the threat of last frost has passed to enjoy another season.

*It
wasn't
me,
I swear!*



Food & flowers

Who doesn't want to hop out of the car and pick a sweet little tomato snack after a long drive to the cabin? Or be able to step outside to snip some fresh herbs for a sunset appetizer? This container packs both flavor and flowers. Thrill and snack with Sun Golds or Sweet 100 cherry tomatoes, fill with parsley, basil and marigolds and spill with alyssum and sweet potato vines. Play with food and color. The herbs are delicious staples in summer salads, garlic potatoes, pasta dishes, chimichurri sauces, pesto and caprese salads. The marigolds help deter deer and squirrels and are adorable when snipped and dropped in a bedside bud vase.



TIP: Harvest extras before heading back home – snip basil and parsley leaves all summer long and store each in a plastic bag in the freezer for winter meals. Crush in the bag before use and enjoy.

Whimsical

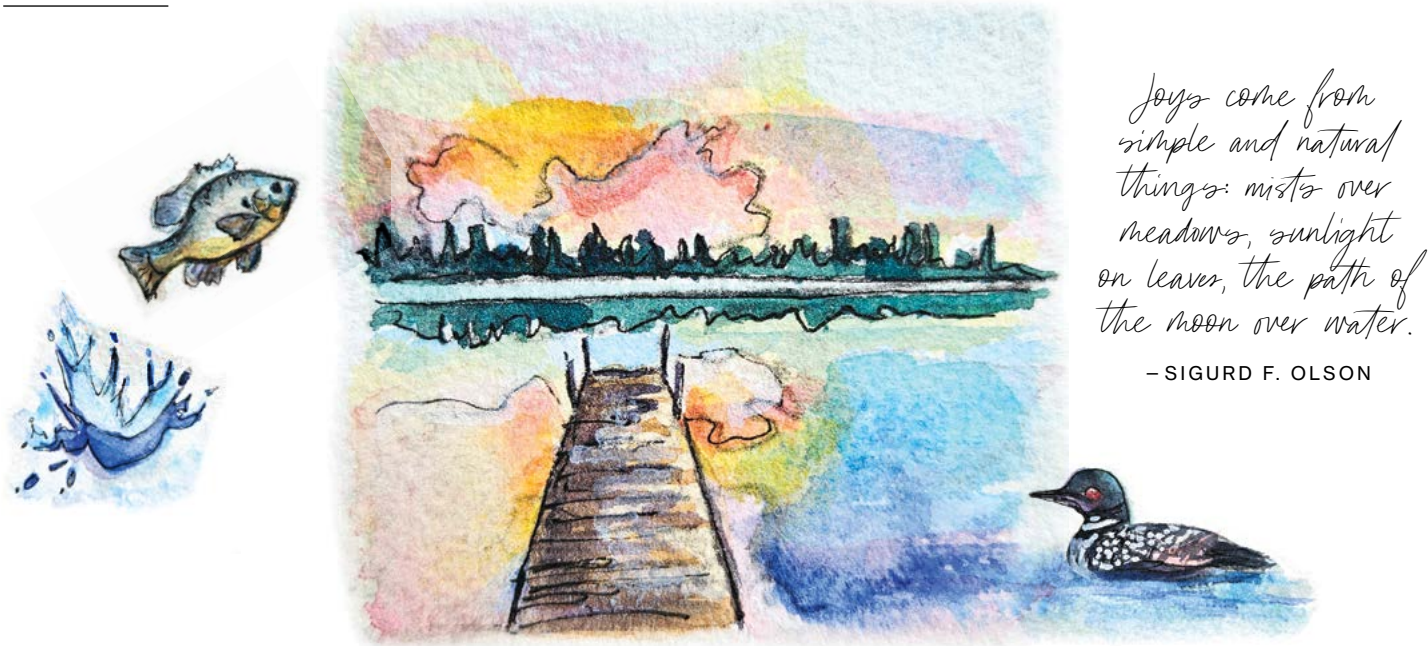
Add any leftover seeds and/or plants from home and toss them in your cabin containers for a fun experiment. This is a fun project for kids. A matching set of containers helps tame some of the chaos and create intention. Nasturtiums, marigolds, gladiolas and zinnias from seed and corms create blooms and cut flowers all season long. It is so fun to roll up to the lake and see how the containers are doing, packed with color, cheer and surprise.

TIP: Dig up the gladiola corm in the container in fall, snip off the green top about 2 inches above the corm, place in a paper bag with dry pine needles and leaves and store in a cool, dark place that doesn't dip below 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Save marigold, zinnia and nasturtium seeds for easy sowing next spring.



Learn how to harvest seeds from container plants in **The Tool Shed.**

See page 64 for details.



Joys come from simple and natural things: mists over meadows, sunlight on leaves, the path of the moon over water.

— SIGURD F. OLSON

ELEMENTS OF CABIN CONTAINER SUCCESS

CONTAINER SELECTION

Go big and bold with large containers (20+ inches in diameter). Look for sizeable, decorative pots at garden centers, home improvement and warehouse stores. Think of your container as a mini garden bed—more space means more soil, nutrients, water and room to grow.

Most plants need at least an inch of rain per week during the growing season. Containers, especially small ones, dry out faster and require more water. Good drainage is important. Containers often feature recommended location marks for drainage holes—drill them out with a ½-inch bit or larger before planting. Inside the container, cover holes with wire screen or mesh to prevent soil clogging. Without drainage holes, plants can drown when containers are saturated during excessive rain.

Be sure to fill your container with high quality potting soil. Don't rob your plants of resources they need.



LOCATION AND CLIMATE

Before purchasing plants, consider your area's last frost date and where your plants will live for the summer. Planting too early in your cabin zone may result in damaged plants. Check your USDA hardiness zone here: northerngardener.org/find-your-hardiness-zone

Last frost dates:

Zone 2: May 15 - May 22

Zone 3: May 1 - May 16

Zone 4: April 24 - May 12

Zone 5: April 7 - April 30

How much sun exposure will they get? Full shade or dappled sun? Do they have access to water? Will they grow out in the open, under an eave or near a sprinkler?

RULE OF THREES

For varied height and interest, remember to plant a mix of thrillers (tall, showy plants with vertical heft), fillers (lush, mid-height plants that fill in around the base of thrillers) and spillers (trailing or vining plants that spill over the edge of the container). Every beautiful, thriving and lasting container begins with strong design.

PLANT FOR YOURSELF

Choose foliage and flowers you love and find interesting and beautiful to look at and nosh on. Plant what you will use and find joy in. Plant what you think matches your place and garden goals. Remember to have fun and keep in mind that every year is different.



Let's party!

Anoka County Master Gardeners Upcoming Events

**2026 Home Landscaping
and Garden Fair**
Saturday, March 28, 2026
8 AM - 3 PM

Bunker Hills Activities Center
550 Bunker Lake Blvd NW
Andover, MN 55304

The annual Anoka County Master Gardener Home Landscaping and Garden Fair is open to the public and is a fun-filled day with a variety of educational classes led by talented Master Gardeners and professional educators. Keynote speaker; Stan Tekiela. When not in class, browse vendor booths and talk gardening with local organizations.

Learn more about the Anoka
County Master Gardener
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2026 Plant Sale
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PLANT PROFILE

Whorled Milkweed

Asclepias verticillata

A dainty prairie native with needle-fine foliage, whorled milkweed feeds a host of pollinators.

STORY **MEG COWDEN**

KEY FEATURES

- Narrow, needle-like leaves resemble rosemary and grow in whorls along a single hairy stem, bowing down at maturity
- White to light green flower clusters, 1 to 3 inches wide, bloom atop the stem mid- to late summer
- Long, slender seed pod, 3 to 4 inches long
- Forms rhizomatous clumps as it establishes
- Excellent alternative to common milkweed, which is taller and pops up more readily
- Often found in groups, clinging to the sunny edges of a prairie

Reaches height of up to 2 feet

BENEFITS

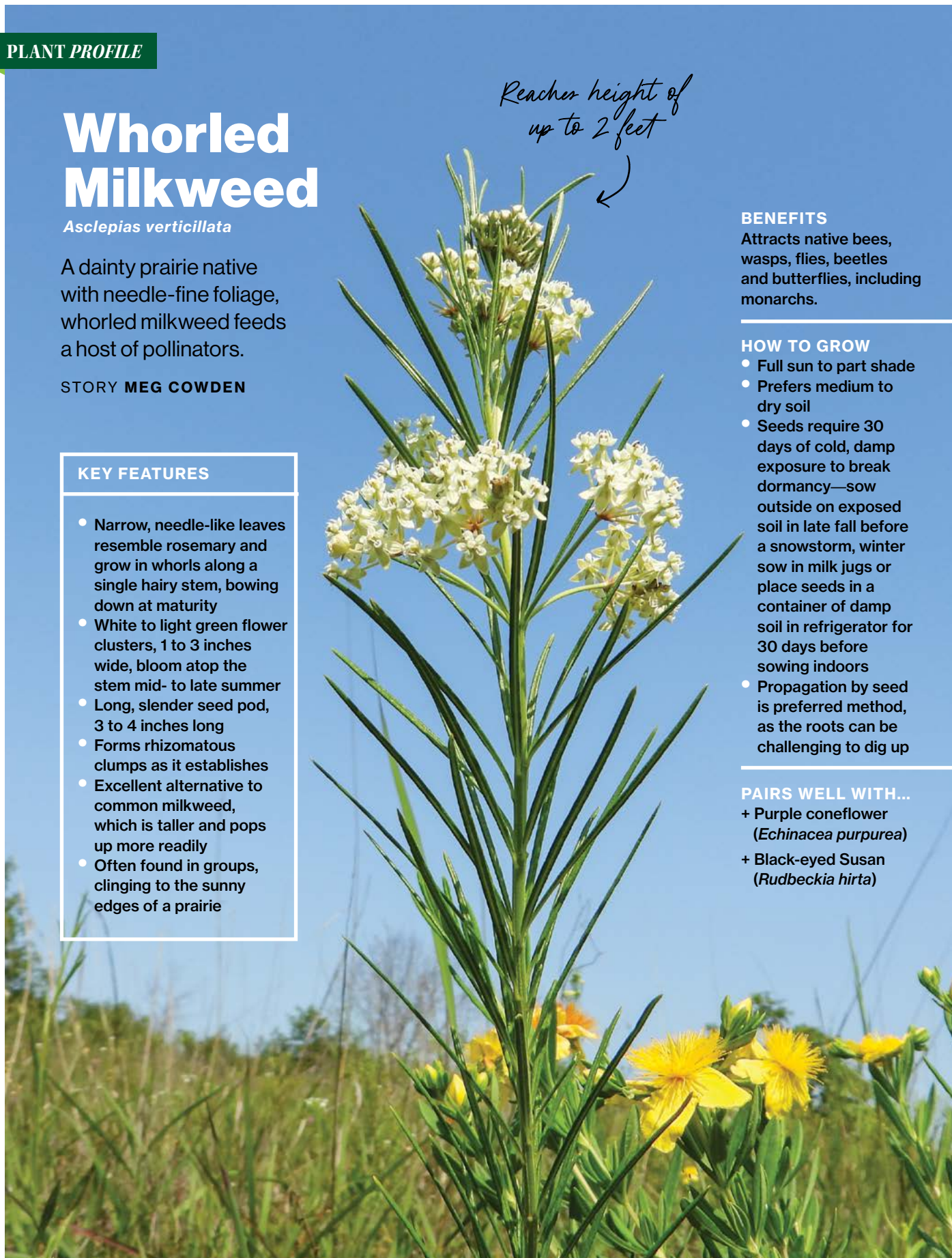
Attracts native bees, wasps, flies, beetles and butterflies, including monarchs.

HOW TO GROW

- Full sun to part shade
- Prefers medium to dry soil
- Seeds require 30 days of cold, damp exposure to break dormancy—sow outside on exposed soil in late fall before a snowstorm, winter sow in milk jugs or place seeds in a container of damp soil in refrigerator for 30 days before sowing indoors
- Propagation by seed is preferred method, as the roots can be challenging to dig up

PAIRS WELL WITH...

- + Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)
- + Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*)



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Q & A

After learning how critical native plants are to the health of our planet, I've decided to plant more. Where can I find them?

From neighborhood nurseries to online resources, here's how to discover native plants that thrive in our northern climate.

STORY AND PHOTOS **DIANE MCGANN**

WE ALL WANT to replenish nature and attract birds and other wildlife to our yards. One way to do that is by adding native plants to our landscape. But where do you find them?

As with all gardening plant choices, think broadly. Your favorite nursery might be a starting point, but don't stop there. Explore specialty nurseries, trade with neighbors, browse plant catalogs, shop garage and plant sales, search online sources, check farmers markets and attend plant swaps. Choose carefully—not all cultivars are natives. Do your research first and then venture out.

Finding the right plants

Start by identifying native plants that will thrive in your area and then find the suppliers that offer them. Several online resources make it easy to obtain region-specific native species. Minnesota Wildflowers features an interactive map that includes small specialty growers—just enter your area to receive a curated list. Blue Thumb provides a register of regional native plant suppliers and describes what each merchant offers. The University of Minnesota's native plant page offers planting suggestions as well as links to regional seed and plant sources.

Garden for Wildlife, affiliated with the National Wildlife Federation, has a helpful tool that lets you choose your state and see pre-curated native plant



Wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) attracts bees and butterflies.

kits designed for local wildlife. The kits emphasize pollinator- and bird-friendly perennials that do well in small residential yards.

Shop the internet

Several online nurseries specialize in native plants for northern gardens; these include Prairie Moon Nursery, Morning Sky Greenery, Minnesota Native Landscapes, Prairie Nursery, Prairie Restorations and Shooting Star Native Seeds.

Close to home

With growing interest in native gardening, many nurseries now feature large native plant sections while others specialize almost exclusively in pollinator-friendly choices. In Minnesota, these include Mother Earth

Gardens, Outback Nurseries, Blazing Star Gardens, BluPrairie Native Plant Nursery and Landscape Alternatives.

Pop-up plant sales

Watch for organizations offering native plant sales in spring and early summer. Most master gardener sales have dedicated sections for native plants; just look for the signs at the entrance. Having worked at my local master gardener plant sale for years, I've seen the native selection grow significantly. Other events include Minnesota Landscape Arboretum sales, the Landscape Revival Native Plant Expo in Lake Elmo, Minn. and the Friends School Plant Sale at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds. Beyond the Twin Cities metropolitan area, check out sales offered in greater Minnesota by the



Gray-headed coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*) is a stalwart in the native prairie garden.

Little Berry Hill Farm in Northfield, the Rochester Flower and Garden Club and the Wild Ones chapter in Mankato. Local soil and water conservation districts often host pre-order native plant sales as well. Most northern states and Canada also host such sales; check your local garden clubs and wildlife organizations for the ones near you.

Whatever your source, find native plants that best fit your landscape and goals. Once they're settled in your garden, sit back, enjoy the wildlife and find satisfaction in knowing you have helped nature thrive right in your own backyard.

Diane McGann is a cold-climate gardening expert, University of Minnesota Tree Care Advisor, master gardener and Ask Extension panelist.



Have a gardening question?

Send it to editor@northerngardener.org

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA | EXTENSION

Hennepin County Master Gardener Volunteers Upcoming Events

For more information: hennepinmastergardeners.org/events

<h3 style="color: #800040; margin: 0;">Spring Plant Sale</h3> <p style="color: #800040; margin: 0;">Saturday, May 16, 9am-2pm</p> <p style="margin: 0;">Hopkins Pavilion, 11000 Excelsior Blvd., Hopkins, MN</p> <p style="color: #003366; margin: 10px 0;">Offering perennials, annuals, natives, vegetables, herbs & more!</p> <p style="margin: 0;">20,000+ Plants—More than ever before! One of the largest plant sales in Hennepin County. Bring your wagon!</p> <p style="margin: 0;">Fully staffed by Master Gardener Volunteers ready to answer all your gardening questions. Free parking!</p> <p style="color: #800040; margin: 10px 0;">To learn more: Hennepinmastergardeners.org/events/spring-plant-sale/</p>	<h3 style="color: #800040; margin: 0;">Learning Garden Tour</h3> <p style="color: #800040; margin: 0;">Saturday, July 11, 8:30am-4:30pm</p> <p style="color: #003366; margin: 10px 0;">Explore 10 inspiring gardens!</p> <p style="margin: 0;">This year's self-guided tour showcases 10 gardens in the southeast area of Hennepin County. Join us for inspiration, education, and garden-related shopping.</p> <p style="margin: 0;">Cost: \$15 in advance; \$20 day of tour.</p> <p style="margin: 0;">Discounts for groups of 10 or more. Children under 12 free with a paying adult. Tour held rain or shine.</p> <p style="color: #800040; margin: 10px 0;">To buy tickets & learn more: Hennepinmastergardeners.org/events/learning-garden-tour/</p>
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THIS SEASON



Slow

Mow

Summer

Researchers are rethinking mowing guidance to help us do right by the bees.

STORY AND PHOTOS GAIL HUDSON



Left: An uncut boulevard near Kew Gardens, London. The international No Mow May movement started 5 years ago in the U.K. **Right:** While dandelions provide low-quality pollen, they offer an early season food source before native plants bloom.

A LONG WITH THE COLORFUL SPRING BULBS of May comes the quick growth of lush, new grass creating a carpet of green. It's the perfect time to let those dandelions and clover grow and bloom, too, to feed pollinators searching for early sources of nectar and pollen. Yard signs in the long grass declaring a homeowner's No Mow May pledge have become a popular sight. In just five years, this public-awareness campaign to encourage Americans to become more eco-friendly with their lawns has been a success.

"No Mow May caught on because it's a catchy phrase, and people like a simple instruction—just don't mow," says Elaine Evans, an entomologist and associate extension professor at the University of Minnesota. Spring is an important time to have flowers for bees as they come out of hibernation, she says. But scientists like Evans soon realized not mowing one month may not be the best for the bees or your lawn.

"What actually ends up being beneficial for bees and other pollinators is a little more nuanced than that," says Evans. "It's more about increasing the number of flowers that are there for them through the whole year."

When it comes to your turfgrass, mowing everything down after a month of growth is never a good idea, says James Wolfin, an entomologist and pollinator biologist at Twin City Seed. "For optimal plant health, you never want to remove more than one-third of the total height of the plant," he says. "At best, you're really stressing out the plant. At worst, you're killing the plant."

Make it a Slow Mow Summer

So what really needs to be done to a lawn to help pollinators? To create an easy, more conservation-friendly method, Wolfin collaborated with the University of Minnesota Bee Lab and came up with a new name: Slow Mow Summer. It has two goals: 1) mowing less frequently to decrease the amount of fossil fuels that are burned every time a lawn is mowed; and 2) timing that mowing to coincide with what's happening with the flowers in a lawn.

"A lot of time flowers are only blooming for a week or two," says Evans. "So maybe you were planning on mowing, you go and take a look and see that there's a lot of things that are flowering, so you delay that mowing by a week. Once those flowers are fading, then that's a good time to mow."

While spring brings flowers such as dandelions, white clover and creeping Charlie to feed pollinators, flowers such as selfheal (*Prunella vulgaris*, USDA zone 4), ground plum (*Astragalus crassicaarpus*, zone 3), lanceleaf tickweed (*Coreopsis lanceolata*, zone 3) or calico aster (*Symphotrichum lateriflorum*, zone 4) appear in June and July, just as other bee species emerge from hibernation. If you don't have them, Evans suggests seeding these native flowers into the lawn.



Left: Brooklyn Park is one of many Minnesota cities adopting Mow Less May to encourage reduced summertime mowing.

Right: In a 2023 survey, 20 percent of participating Brooklyn Park residents said they are working on or plan to convert their lawn to a managed natural landscape.
Photo: Stephen Thomforde



Your yard: a pollinator habitat?

Can leaving the flowers in your lawn make a difference for pollinators? The emerging evidence says that yes, a residential yard can actually play a key role in biodiversity conservation. “My colleagues were dismissive of lawns as habitat,” says Susannah Lerman, a USDA Forest Service research ecologist in Amherst, Mass. “I wanted to test this idea that every time we mow our lawns, we’re most likely removing floral resources—I’m thinking about the dandelions, the clovers and a whole bunch of other species ... that might be food for pollinators and bees.”

In 2018, Lerman used what she called a “lazy lawn mower” approach to study the number of bees in lawns mowed at varying frequencies. After two years, her research showed lawns mowed every two weeks supported the highest number of bees and was dominated by more “generalist” bee species.

However, lawns mowed every three weeks had two-and-a-half times the number of lawn flowers, which attracted surprisingly fewer bees but more bee species. Lerman isn’t sure, but she thinks the taller grass might have made it more difficult for native bees (typically the size of a grain of rice) to access the nectar and pollen.

The Slow Mow Summer method requires homeowners to use their lawn as their guide to decide the best time to cut the grass. “I think about it more from the bee side of things, just taking a look at what’s happening,” Evans says. “Is it super active for bees? Then you should wait until those flowers die down before mowing.”

The Mow Less movement

Like many municipalities in Minnesota, Blaine city leaders ended their No Mow May registration program for residents once they heard about the University of Minnesota Bee Lab’s new recommendations. Instead, they’ve rewritten city ordinances to allow the intentional management of lawns for bee and pollinator health. Residents can mow less frequently as long as they keep their grass at 8 inches in height or less. The city will ticket if the lawn contains invasive weeds on the state’s noxious weed list (dandelion and clover are not on the list).

The City of Rosemount is taking a different tack. They’ve renamed their program Mow Less May and use the month as their seasonal kickoff to encourage residents to follow four key sustainable practices. “These have high impact and we think they’re easy to implement,” says Jane Byron, the city’s stormwater specialist. The city recommends low-input mowing, only watering and fertilizing when needed, leaving the leaves for pollinator hibernation and planting native gardens. The city offers resources to teach residents the “how-to” as well as grants and rebates for native plantings and irrigation controllers.

“You still have this great yard that’s providing what you want to get out of it,” Byron says. “But maybe you add a little bit more pop of color and the beauty that goes along with it. And hey, who does not love butterflies and birds visiting their yards?”

Other benefits

While the big plus is more flowers for the bees, Wolfen says Slow Mow Summer has many other benefits. Lawns with taller grass species such as tall fescue are more drought tolerant because of their deeper roots.

“And when you reduce mowing, without a shadow of a doubt, your carbon costs associated with lawn care is dramatically decreased,” he says. Wolfen points to a recent Ohio State University study that compared the carbon costs of high-input lawns (frequent mowing, watering and fertilizing) to a low-input lawn (less frequent mowing, more drought tolerant and little or no fertilizer applied). Low-input lawns have one-sixth the carbon cost of a traditional turfgrass lawn.

Taking a first step

Slow Mow Summer may be a baby step, but Evans says it's here to stay for a while. And when people are ready? She says they can add more flowers (natives in particular) and create more nesting habitat. "By having less and less areas that are mowed, you can create more of that three-dimensional habitat, which really adds a lot of value for conservation," she says. The bees will be happy, too.



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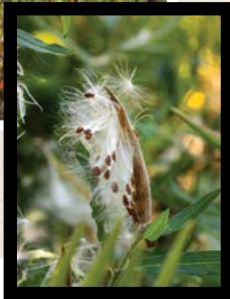
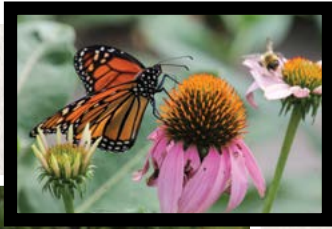
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Native Plants *Primer*

Let's get on the same page
about this trend.

STORY
JENNIFER RENSENBRINK

NATIVE PLANTS ARE HAVING A MOMENT. I am seeing more of them around the neighborhood and a growing number of garden signs (Monarch Waystation and Certified Native Habitat, to name a few) boasting public commitment to help our planet. What does it all mean?

Let's start with defining some terms. A native plant evolved in the area where you live. All plants are native somewhere, but which plants evolved within a roughly 100-mile radius of where you live? Fortunately, it's easy to find out. One great source of plant lists is the National Wildlife Federation plant finder at nativeplantfinder.nwf.org.

A non-native plant is not necessarily invasive—most home vegetables are not native, but they're not taking over our state parks, either. An invasive plant, such as buckthorn, is a non-native that displaces native plants.

Why does it matter?

Over the past several hundred years, we've imported a variety of plants and animals, from garlic mustard to pheasants to creeping bellflower, to North America. Walk through almost any natural area in the Twin Cities and you'll see invasive plants in large numbers. Insects and birds are declining at alarming rates as their habitats degrade and disappear.

By choosing native plants for our gardens, we can ensure the survival of iconic species like the monarch butterfly and less endangered but beloved ones like chickadees.

But wait, there's more. In addition to supporting insects, native plants serve other purposes, too: filtering rainwater, tolerating dry periods, reducing the need for mowing and leaf blowing and providing fruit and seeds to migrating birds.

What's a nativar?

Be wary of the nativar. This term, a portmanteau for "native" and "cultivar," describes plants like purple coneflowers that are carefully selected for unusual features, cloned and sold by the nursery industry. The result? Ninebark shrubs, for example, that have black foliage or "double" coneflowers that have an interesting flower structure.

There are two important things to know about nativars. The first is that some of these plants are not as beneficial to insects as the original wild species was. For example, unusual flower structures can make pollen impossible for bees to reach. Secondly, many native perennials are short-lived. If allowed to re-seed, it's more likely that the offspring of a nativar will actually revert to looking like the wild parent species. This doesn't mean you can't plant a cool orange coneflower, but you should adjust your expectations about what its offspring might look like.

Clockwise from middle top:

- Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*)
- Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
- Witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*)
- A late-season bloomer, asters attract pollinators in fall.
- Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)
- A mix of native plants supports increased biodiversity of insects and wildlife.
- Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)

This brings us to the most important thing to keep in mind when gardening with native plants—think of your garden as a plant community rather than a collection of individual specimens. Avoid using plastic or rock mulch. If you mulch the first year, use something that will break down in a year or two, like wood chips or straw. Your goal is not a handful of individual plants surrounded by mulch—your goal is to not have to mulch at all because the space fills with plants over time.

Native plant gardening involves letting go, to some extent. Some plants may spread more than others. Some may die out because you didn't plant them in the right spot. But others fill in. You'll have a year where one plant is more dominant due to weather or other factors. Then the next year, everything shifts again. Over the years, I've come to see myself as an editor in my native gardens—I'll pull out plants here and there if I feel they're getting too aggressive, and I'll keep weeds at bay. Other than that, I watch it unfold each year and embrace the serendipity.

An established native plant garden can be fairly low-maintenance, but it will never be no-maintenance. In some respects, you can decide how heavy-handed you want to be with your yearly edits. Start small, take notes, enjoy the process and remember that every "failure" is nothing more than a learning opportunity.

Getting started

Make a list of native plants you're interested in, selecting plants that are right for your growing conditions and choosing a variety so you have something blooming all season long (early-, mid- and late-season flowers).

Suggested shortcut: Order pre-designed kits from local native plant nurseries.

A word of caution: Avoid buying "wildflower" or "butterfly" seed mixes from big box stores. They often contain large amounts of annuals and/or non-native plants. If you want native plants, order from a native plant specialty retailer or attend a spring native plant sale event near where you live.



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Natives We *Love*

PERENNIALS FOR SHADE

Solomon's seal
(*Polygonatum biflorum*)
Drought tolerant and stately with arching stems and dark blue berries in the fall.

Wild ginger
(*Asarum canadense*)
A great groundcover choice, but less tolerant of dry soils.

Bloodroot
(*Sanguinaria canadensis*)
Early daisy-like flowers give way to leaves that look like a fairy's umbrella and persist into early summer.

Wild columbine
(*Aquilegia canadensis*)
Graceful early summer flowers are adored by hummingbirds and small children alike. Short-lived, so let it re-seed.

PERENNIALS FOR SUN

Little bluestem
(*Schizachyrium scoparium*)
A bunching grass that turns to a burnt amber color in fall and winter.

Purple coneflower
(*Echinacea purpurea* or *Echinacea pallida*)
My first and favorite native plant, a classic for a reason!

Showy goldenrod
(*Solidago speciosa*)
Less aggressive than Canada goldenrod, and a bumble bee party spot in autumn.

Milkweed (*Asclepias* sp.)
All milkweeds help monarch butterflies, so plant the one that appeals to you!



SHRUBS

Serviceberry
(*Amelanchier* sp.)
Edible purple berries, size will depend on how much sun it gets. Nativars of serviceberry tend to focus on overall size and shape. Somewhat shade tolerant.



Nannyberry
(*Viburnum lentago*)
A taller understory shrub or small tree. Large, white cluster flowers in the spring and dark purple berries in the fall.



Witch hazel
(*Hamamelis virginiana*)
Native witch hazels are the last thing to bloom, often in November with tiny, wispy yellow flowers. Part shade is ideal.

Red twig dogwood
(*Cornus sericea*)
Another classic that has been made into many natives of various sizes, shapes and colors. The wild species, red osier dogwood, is tolerant of a variety of conditions.



TREES

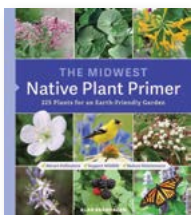
Oak (*Quercus* sp.)
If you have space for an oak tree, it's one of the most critically important species you can plant. Oak trees support hundreds of insect species, making it a keystone plant for birds.

Chokecherry
(*Prunus virginiana*)
A smaller tree that produces berries well-loved by both squirrels and my dad, the spring flowers are a boon for emerging pollinators.



Bladdernut
(*Staphylea trifolia*)
Tolerant of heavy, dry shade, this understory tree deserves more attention. It features cool, papery seed hulls in the fall.

RECOMMENDED READING



The Midwest Native Plant Primer: 225 Plants for an Earth-Friendly Garden
by Alan Branahagen



Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants
by Douglas W. Tallamy



Prairie Up: An Introduction to Natural Garden Design
by Benjamin Vogt

Buy these books in our curated Bookshop at bookshop.org/shop/northerngardener
A portion of your purchase will support Northern Gardener's educational mission.



Check out more native plant resources online.
See page 64 for details.

garden weather or not

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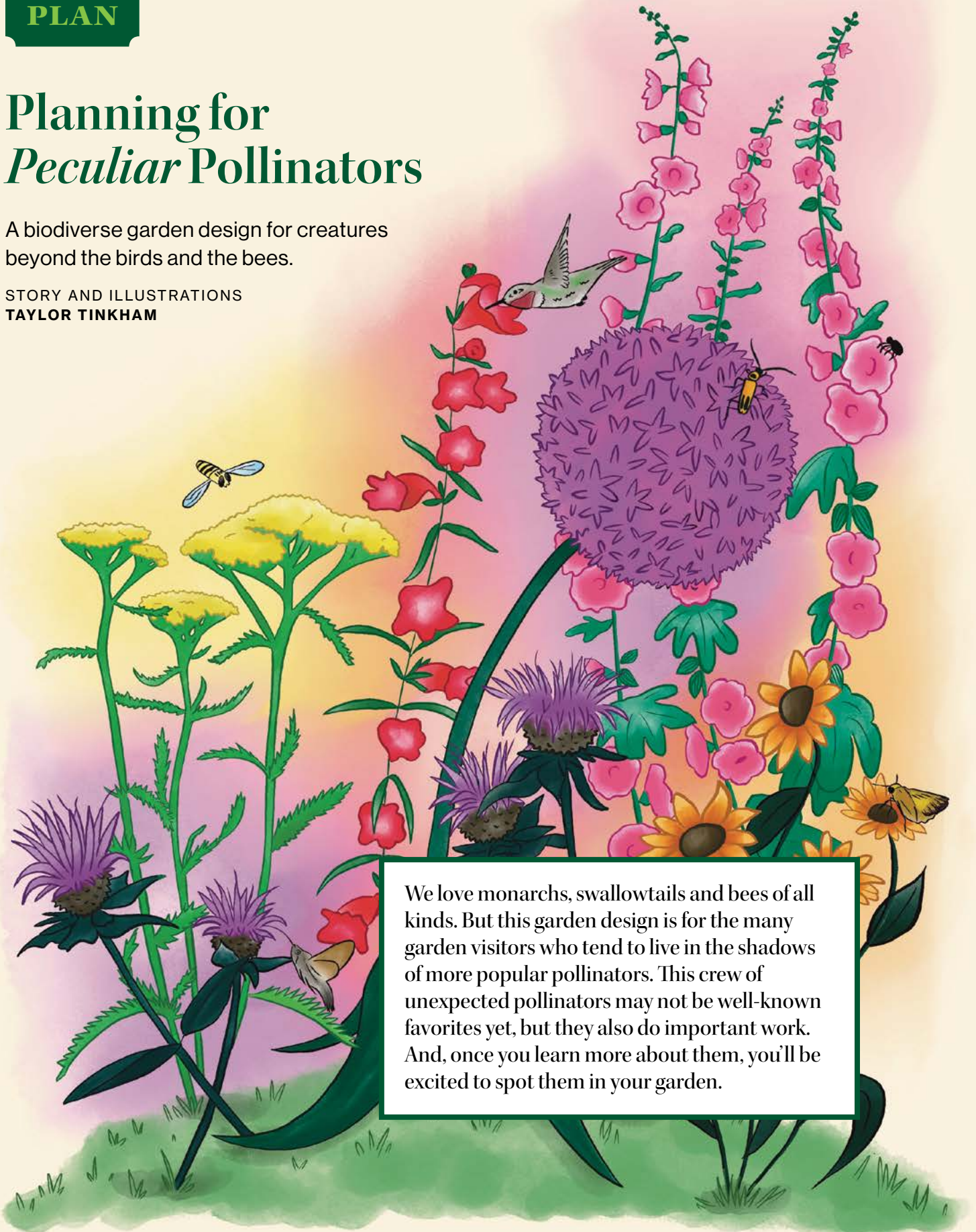
Photo by Michelle Mero Riedel

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Planning for *Peculiar* Pollinators

A biodiverse garden design for creatures beyond the birds and the bees.

STORY AND ILLUSTRATIONS
TAYLOR TINKHAM



We love monarchs, swallowtails and bees of all kinds. But this garden design is for the many garden visitors who tend to live in the shadows of more popular pollinators. This crew of unexpected pollinators may not be well-known favorites yet, but they also do important work. And, once you learn more about them, you'll be excited to spot them in your garden.

The Plants + The Pollinators

SPIDERS

The unsung heroes of pollination, spiders are not only capable of pollinating plants while hunting (especially the jumping species), but they also capture insects, such as aphids, that damage plants. Spiders appreciate tall, dense, unscented plants to build webs in. In a shaded area, large fern varieties are good for web-making, while hollyhocks make an excellent sunny spider home.

MOTHS

Northern gardens are home to a wide variety of beautiful moths. Diurnal moths (day shift pollinators), such as the whimsical hummingbird moth, love bee balm, while nocturnal moths, like the gorgeous luna moth, need night-blooming flowers like moonflower vine. Remember to turn off your lights for nighttime pollinators; artificial light can disrupt their navigation and ability to find mates and food.
[Learn more at: northerngardener.org/night-shift-pollinators](http://northerngardener.org/night-shift-pollinators)

SKIPPERS

Named for their speed, these butterflies dart around quickly from flower to flower. Their fuzzy bodies and smaller wings also make them identifiable. Larval food sources for skippers vary widely, but adults tend to be generalist feeders, enjoying whatever nectar is available. They benefit from plants that bloom throughout the season. *Heliopsis*, also known as false sunflower, blooms in early summer and continues into the fall, making it a great choice for skippers.



HYDRATION STATION

Pollinators need shallow water sources for safe sipping. Add rock islands to a birdbath, or create a puddling station by filling a shallow dish with sand, mud, stones and water. Monitor water level and refresh frequently to discourage mosquito larvae and algae.

RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRDS

These tiny migrants travel thousands of miles each year between Central America and southern Canada and they rely on nectar-rich flowers to refuel. As they feed, pollen collects on their bills and feathers, making them efficient pollinators. They favor fiery colors and tube-shaped flowers: penstemon and northern natives like large beardtongue or red- and orange-flowering cultivars such as 'Dark Towers' or Red Rocks®.

HOVERFLIES

If you don't look too closely, you may think hoverflies are bees or wasps since they mimic them to ward off predators. Unlike the creatures they imitate, hoverflies do not bite or sting, and they only have one set of wings. Not only are they great pollinators, but in their larval stage they're very hungry aphid eaters. Hoverflies love the flat, accessible surface of small flowers, so yarrow is a great choice.

BETTERLES

Not necessarily known for graceful movement, beetles appreciate a large landing pad – big, bowl-shaped magnolia flowers or dense flower clusters of *Allium* and goldenrod. Because some beetles nosh on foliage while pollinating, many beetle-pollinated plants have thicker leaves that tolerate damage. The common soldier beetle is a notable exception, pollinating without harm, usually on yellow blooms.

Ramp Up

Native plants aren't just a tasty treat for pollinators—we like them, too.

STORY AND RECIPE **STEPHANIE THUROW**

NATIVE TO THE NORTHERN FORESTS OF AMERICA, ramps are typically found after the snow melts. They die off once the foliage in the forests grows so dense that the ramps no longer get sufficient sunlight. That's why ramps are only available in the early spring; by mid-May they become increasingly difficult to find.

If you're not familiar with ramps, they taste like a cross between scallions and garlic. They can be eaten raw or cooked. All parts of the ramp can be eaten, even their leafy greens.

Ramp season is fleeting, so extend the harvest and preserve a batch for months with this easy, straightforward recipe.



Wild ramps should be harvested in the early spring. By mid-May, they are harder to find.

Fermented Wild Ramps

YIELDS 1 CUP

This recipe is packed with flavor and makes a great condiment for chili, hot dogs, bratwursts and eggs, and is also delicious stirred into salads and pastas.



INGREDIENTS

3 bundles of ramps, $\frac{3}{4}$ cup once prepped (sliced)

1 bay leaf

$\frac{1}{8}$ tsp whole black peppercorns

1 clove garlic, crushed

Brine: 1 tsp coarse kosher salt dissolved in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water

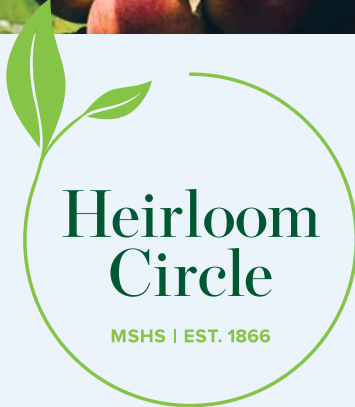
INSTRUCTIONS

1. Thoroughly clean the ramps. Submerge them in a large pot of cold water and allow them to soak for a while. Use your hand to agitate them and help the dirt fall off.
2. Use a paper towel to dry the ramps and rub off any additional dirt or thin skin that is beginning to slough off.
3. Trim off the root ends and peel away the outer layer of the ramp. Trim off the leafy greens (this part can be cooked down separately and enjoyed). Once the ramps are cleaned and trimmed, give them another rinse.
4. Cut the ramps into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch slices until you have $\frac{3}{4}$ cup.
5. In a clean 8-ounce canning jar, add the remaining ingredients. Tuck the bay leaf on the side of the jar so that it does not get crushed. Add the sliced ramps.
6. Stir up the brine and pour it over the ramps until everything is completely submerged. Leave at least a half inch of headspace from the brine to the rim of the jar. Add in a small jar weight, if you have one, to help keep the floating pieces submerged. Apply the canning lid and tightly screw on the jar ring.

FERMENTATION

The ramps will ferment for five days. Ferment at room temperature, ideally between 60 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit and keep out of direct sunlight. Check on the ferment daily to make sure the brine remains over the produce. If the produce is above the brine, use a clean utensil to push it back down below the brine.

Burp the jar daily by unscrewing the lid briefly and tightening it back on to allow any gas buildup to release (and avoid jar breakage). After five days, taste test the ramps to see how the flavor is coming along. The ramps should have melded flavors with the other ingredients and have a sour, tangy taste. You can expect that the brine will have a pinkish hue. Transfer to the refrigerator once fermented to your liking, with the brine and all. This ferment is best enjoyed within six months.



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APPLE PHOTO BY ANNA KAMINOVA ON UNSPLASH



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Rewilding Public Land

What is the purpose of public land?
There has been a shift toward
conservation since the early 1970s.

STORY AND PHOTOS MICHELLE BRUHN



THE BEAUTY AND IMPACT of planting native species in our own yards can be seen, heard and even tasted soon after they take root. On a large scale, thanks to a growing number of groups, similar efforts are being brought to life on the 12 million acres of public land in Minnesota. This land includes a few acres here and there in the Twin Cities metro area as well as thousands of acres outstate across prairies, bluffs, woodlands and wetlands. The lasting impact of rewilding ripples far and wide, touching the hearts, minds and practices of all who take a hike, paddle a canoe or bike through our public land.

Lasting impact

Public lands are where we can make the longest lasting impacts. Unlike home gardens, which eventually shift ownership with each sale, public lands are here for the long haul. This was written into law as part of pro-conservation federal legislation efforts in the 1970s, including the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. This mandate for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) formally ended the policy of disposing of public lands, instead requiring that they be retained in federal ownership and managed to protect scientific, scenic, historical and ecological values for the people. In Minnesota, the Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment boosted state efforts, adding roughly \$40 million to restoration endeavors since 2009.

Michael Goodnature, the Natural Resources Manager for Ramsey County Parks and Recreation department (St. Paul and surrounding suburbs) has been involved in varied park restoration projects since he took the job in 2013. His focus? Restoring more of Ramsey County's 7,000 acres of public county land.


Path to restoration

"The county now has thousands of acres of restored habitat, including oak savanna, oak woodlands, maple basswood forests, prairie, shoreline and wetlands," Mike says. "We currently have several hundred acres in active restoration, enhancement or maintenance."

Projects are chosen based on a matrix of needs that considers all land in the Ramsey County parks system. The team researches existing vegetation quality, rarity of the land cover type and wildlife need/use and ecologically significant species. They review historic aerial photos and reference Minnesota Department of Natural Resources geographic maps with different layers, including a "native plant community" layer. Then they get boots on the ground, walking the land to better understand its inherent gifts, finding old growth forests, undisturbed prairies, flyway use along rivers or rare plants.

Mike says the county's main goal is "to create high quality habitat for wildlife because, once you've restored the native habitat, the rest follows. It's a 'plant it and they will come' approach."

Projects often start with invasive species removal. In woodlands, this usually includes buckthorn, which outcompetes many of our native shrub layer species. If he can, Mike waits a season or two to reveal what's lying dormant in the soil, waiting to wake up. After opening up the forest floor, he's seen flushes of growth, such as a carpet of white oak seedlings or patches of trillium returning under old-growth oak forests. If a site needs a boost, they'll seed with an appropriate blend of natives, often with some annual grasses mixed in to fuel the first round of prescribed burns.



Left: Shovel Point at Tettegouche State Park.
This Page: Old Growth Forest at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, Chapel Loop hike.

THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

Minnesota is overflowing with public land to share and protect. Much of it is working, agricultural landscape, underscoring how conservation, recreation and major economic land use needs must coexist.

~24%

of Minnesota's soil is considered public land—more than 12 million acres or just over two acres per person.

5.6 million

acres are managed by the Minnesota DNR. Minnesota's 87 counties manage another 2.8 million acres. 25 million acres are considered agricultural in Minnesota.

<1%

of our native prairies and less than 1 percent of our oak savanna landscapes remain in Minnesota.

65 million

visitors enjoyed county parks across the Twin Cities metro area in 2024.



“Restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise. True restoration requires a healed, reciprocal connection.” —AUTHOR ROBIN WALL KIMMERER



Long-term management plans shape public lands through controlled burns, animal grazing and reseeded after natural fire events.
Left: Prescribed burn (Photo: Mike Goodnature). **Middle:** Buffalo bull and herd at Blue Mounds State Park (Photo: Molly Tranel Nelson).
Right: Prairie perennials return after natural fire at McDougal Lake in Superior National Forest.

Getting people on the land

Recreation on the land is the second piece of Mike’s job. To this end, he gives direction to special interest groups and people looking for education around foraging and birding. In Battle Creek Regional Park, for example, they worked with the Minnesota Off-Road Cyclists group. This community involvement helps balance recreation with restoration, ultimately creating multi-use paths that avoid patches of endangered species while providing access to the land. These paths can also create natural barriers for prescribed burns.

Mike reminds us that the Midwest landscape co-evolved with fire. Bringing fire back to the land has long been known as the most effective, least expensive way to manage large swaths of land. “The last century has seen the absence of fires,” Mike says. “That, along with climate change, has allowed invasive species, pests and diseases to take hold. The costs to remove or deal with those new issues are much higher than if we could get in there and do a prescribed burn. And the public gets it—there’s been good education in our state surrounding the need for prescribed burns on public land.” Managing large acreages proactively makes it easier for nearby home gardeners as well.

With the loss or degradation of habitat comes loss of native wildlife. But, since 1961, buffalo have returned to roam Blue Mound State Park. Molly Tranel Nelson, regional resource specialist, helps manage the “patch burn grazing”

process on the park’s range. This method mimics nature and creates a mosaic of diverse growth. “Because buffalo prefer grasses over flowers and forbs (non-woody flowering plants), they help keep down patches of tall grass prairie so shorter native flower species can flourish. Visitors will now see prairie violets (*Viola pedatifida*) in the spring and sweet everlasting (*Pseudognaphalium obtusifolium*) in the fall,” Molly says. “The more heavily eaten areas don’t have any dry grass to burn, resulting in a patchwork of green and black after the prescribed burns, rather like a quilt.”

Community-driven metro plantings can have a big impact as well. The Bee Line is a 2.25-mile corridor of roadside native plant gardens in St. Paul, Minn., that support pollinators, beautify the area and offer a model for low-maintenance public landscape.

Not surprisingly, restored areas are impacting many wildlife communities. Volunteers with a robust bird banding program at Long Lake Regional Park in New Brighton, Minn., report recapturing banded birds multiple times over the past six years, a very positive sign. Research and assessment of indicator species (often insects) and water quality is ongoing to measure long term success.

Increased county, state and national park use shows more people understand the value of protecting landscapes and wildlife while engaging with and learning from them. And that smells like sweet success to this gardener.



Read public land rewilding case studies in The Tool Shed. See page 64 for details. →



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SPRING CHECKLIST: COMPLETE

- Start Seeds
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- Prune & Prep
- Early Season Color
- Plant the Right Hardy Picks

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Professor *of the Prairie*

A backyard gardener turned his love for wild landscapes into one of the largest prairie restoration companies in the Midwest.

STORY **CLARA FUEHLER + ERIK BERGSTROM**
PHOTOS **PRAIRIE RESTORATIONS**

WHEN IT COMES TO ON-THE-JOB TRAINING, not many can lay claim to the kind of education Ron Bowen gained while working on Bruce Dayton's property in the 1960s. Bruce, grandson of department store tycoon George Dayton, was an avid art collector and philanthropist as well as a conservationist.

"I worked there for 10 years, helping him to develop a very wonderful piece of property. It's called Wood-Rill," Ron recalls. "And in that process, I learned how to propagate native plants, and I got pretty good at it. People started to knock on the door, you know?"

Since those days, Ron's commitment to rewinding landscapes has become his life mission. For more than 40 years, Bowen and his team at Prairie Restorations have worked to build back Minnesota's native prairies to pre-settlement times (mid-19th century), using tools like F.J. Marschner's original vegetation map of Minnesota and dot density maps, which are used to illustrate how plant communities sorted themselves before modern human interference.

"Our mission is the only thing that's kept us going," Ron says. "When you have a mission-driven cause, you know it's a huge motivator and it's not just a job. It's like, what choice is there? I tell people I drew the short straw. Somebody had to do this."

While it's no small task, Ron and his crew are up to the challenge. Since 1977, Prairie Restorations has built an archive of more than 400 native plants, more than doubling the initial 200 species Bowen began with. With over 2,000 native plant species identified throughout Minnesota, they're just getting started. "Minnesota had roughly 18 million acres of prairie, about one-third of the state, and we're down now to about 150,000 acres, so maybe 1 percent. Most of it's gone."



For conservationists and ecologists, it's a sad, yet true, fact. From the mid-1800s up until the late 20th century, most of Minnesota's forests, savannas and prairies gave way to farmland, nearly all of it monoculture, and grazing pastures. Now, as cities expand, those lands are going back into the hands of property owners. Getting back to the remnant prairies must rely on collaboration from these individuals.

"I've been on a kick lately," Ron says. "I've lived up in the sand plain long enough to see a great deal of change. I'm now calling what were farm fields of the Anoka sand plain 'house fields' because they have become two and a half acre lots, one right after another. And what are the (homeowners) doing? Putting in bluegrass. They mow it, water it, fertilize it. What an opportunity in a way."

Converting farm fields back into home acreage is just the first step in a long restoration process, according to Ron. As knowledge and awareness grows, he hopes to see more homeowners take the added step of converting half a typical lot into a prairie and bringing the land full circle.



Left page: Prairie Restorations owner Ron Bowen in a restored prairie. This Ramsey County park's wetland was successfully restored.

This page: A native pollinator visits the flower of a wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*). Native bee balm (*Monarda fistulosa*) thrives in a rain garden outside Riverside Park Greenhouse.

Historically in the Midwest, an acre would have contained 250 different species of plants. Most of Prairie Restorations' projects aim for about 20 percent of that—or 50 plants per acre. “You know, it’s progress. You gradually learn and implement. Maybe last year we did 50 species, and we’ll do 51 this year and 55 five years from now.”

For those wanting to participate in Prairie Restorations' mission, it's important to pair that sense of gradual progress with time. Though one may start their garden with a vision, letting nature take its course and sort itself—just as it did 200 hundred years ago—comes with letting go.

“That’s how it has to be. Plants don’t develop overnight. A huge part of the journey for restoration, whether it’s a garden or it’s a 1,000-acre site, that whole experience—watching and learning, if you will—never ends. That’s one of the things that’s really wonderful about native gardening.”

His reminder to new and experienced gardeners? Keep learning, keep growing. “There’s a constant evolution of things. Certain plants don’t last forever. Other plants don’t show up forever. The whole process keeps a lot of people very energized.”

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**RECORD SETTING
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Biodiversity Matters

Plant a wide variety of native plants to support a range of pollinators.

STORY **EMILIE SNELL-ROOD**

A POLLINATOR CRAZE has been sweeping the gardening world over the past decade. Pollinator seed mixes dot the aisles of Home Depot, and the covers of gardening magazines promise to tell you how to design a stylish pollinator garden. You can register your pollinator planting in the Monarch Waystation program and, in Minnesota, you can get state funds to replace lawns with bee-friendly plants.

Converting pockets of your yard to pollinator habitat can make a big difference in supporting declining populations of bees, butterflies and other pollinators, especially if you include many different native plants.

Why does biodiversity matter in a pollinator garden? In a pollinator garden, we tend to think the most about the blooming flowers. Those flowers are lovely to us as gardeners, and they draw in those pollinators. Butterflies use their straw-like proboscis to suck sugar filled nectar from the base of each flower—those in our region are restricted to a liquid diet. Butterflies are there for the nectar

but unwittingly pick up pollen on their faces and legs as they move around on flowers, pollinating plants in the process.

Bees in your garden are on the hunt for not only nectar, but also pollen. They have specialized body hairs and flattened parts of their legs to collect and store pollen, which they transport back to their nests for their young. Because of this, bees get the lion's share of attention as pollinators, and indeed, they are on average three times more effective pollinators than butterflies. All those colorful flowers are only part of the equation for butterflies and many other pollinators (moths, beetles, flies). While young bees feed on pollen, young butterflies (caterpillars) feed on leaves. Caterpillars have chewing mouthparts, munching on leaves and roaming around your garden discreetly. But a caterpillar cannot eat just any plant. What looks like a sea of lush green vegetation to us is anything but that to a caterpillar.

And this is also why biodiversity matters to pollinators.

An eastern tailed-blue butterfly rests on a blade of grass.



A Karner blue butterfly nectars on a black-eyed Susan.



An Aphrodite fritillary butterfly nectaring on butterfly weed, showing how butterflies feed through a straw-like proboscis.



A monarch butterfly feeds on an American alumroot.



Pairing Butterflies *with* Native Host Plants

Butterflies lay their eggs on specific **host plants**—only certain kinds can support their caterpillars.

Plants native to the region are more likely to be edible to the caterpillars living there.

While flowers and butterflies enjoy a cooperative partnership (butterflies sip nectar while spreading pollen), caterpillars and plants have a more contentious relationship (caterpillars munch on leaves). As a result, plants have developed a host of defenses to deter herbivores, from sharp spines and tough leaves to flowing latex that mucks up mouthparts.

One of the most fascinating of these defenses? The chemicals plants use to defend themselves. Over half of our modern medications come from plants—*aspirin*, for example, is derived from chemicals in willow. Herbivores need ways to counter those toxins, and those counter-defenses are often very specific. For example, monarch caterpillars have very specific proteins to deal with the toxins in milkweed, and cabbage white butterfly caterpillars have a different set of very specific proteins to cope with toxins in mustards.

The relationship between butterflies and plants could be described as “It’s complicated,” since they are both helpful as pollinators and pesky as herbivores. This also explains why a diverse group of butterflies in your garden requires a diversity of plants. We need to provide not only nectar plants for adult butterflies but also host plants to feed young caterpillars. Different plants have different defensive chemicals. And more distantly related plants have more distinct chemicals and thus support different kinds of butterflies. We can use this knowledge of plant-insect interactions to build a better pollinator garden.



American Copper
Native Plant: Greater Water Dock (*Rumex britannica*)
Host Plant: Buckwheats (Polygonaceae)



American Lady
Native Plant: Small Pussytoes (*Antennaria howellii*)
Host Plant: Sunflower family (Asteraceae)



Delaware Skipper
Native Plant: Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*)
Host Plant: Grasses (Poaceae)



Edward's Hairstreak
Native Plant: Bur Oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*)
Host Plant: Oaks (Fagaceae)



Olympia Marble
Native Plant: Slender Rockcress (*Arabis pycnocarpa*)
Host Plant: Mustard family (Brassicaceae)



Red Admiral
Native Plant: Slender Stinging Nettle (*Urtica gracilis*)
Host Plant: Nettles (Urticaceae)

The relationship between butterflies and plants could be described as “It’s complicated.”



Aphrodite Fritillary
Native Plant: Bird's Foot Violet (*Viola pedata*)
Host Plant: Violets (Violaceae)



Baltimore Checkerspot
Native Plant: White Turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*)
Host Plant: Plantains (Plantaginaceae)



Black Swallowtail
Native Plant: Golden Alexander (*Zizia aurea*)
Host Plant: Carrot family (Apiaceae)



Gray Comma
Native Plant: Missouri Gooseberry (*Ribes missouriense*)
Host Plant: Currants (Grossularaceae)



Hackberry Emperor
Native Plant: Common Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*)
Host Plant: Hemp family (Cannabaceae)



Monarch
Native Plant: Swamp Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*)
Host Plant: Milkweeds (Apocynaceae)



Silver Spotted Skipper
Native Plant: False Indigo Bush (*Amorpha fruticosa*)
Host Plant: Legumes (Fabaceae)



Tiger Swallowtail
Native Plant: Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*)
Host Plant: Rose family (Rosaceae)



Viceroy
Native Plant: Peachleaf Willow (*Salix amygdaloides*)
Host Plant: Willows (Salicaceae)

Diversify Your Pollinator Garden

Diverse plants

A general rule of thumb is to plant a diversity of host plant species that come from different plant families (Wikipedia has a handy side bar on each species page that shows how they are grouped into genera and families). If you add 10 new plant species to your garden, you will support a wider range of butterflies when those plant species are from 10 different families rather than from the same family. Ten species from the sunflower family will attract many nectar searching butterflies but will attract a much smaller number of butterflies as host plants. Instead, if you plant grasses, violets, legumes, milkweeds and mustards (all from different plant families), you will provide host plants for many more butterflies (see table on page 38).

Native plants

Planting native plants is also key to providing the host plants for pollinators. Most of the butterfly species native to the Upper Midwest will be unable to deal with the toxins in plants from a completely different part of the world. This is why our native oak trees and goldenrods can support caterpillars from hundreds of species of moths and butterflies, but why common buckthorn or garlic mustard (both originally from Europe) can support fewer than a dozen species in the Upper Midwest.

Key plant groups

The table on page 38 shows some native plant species from a diversity of plant families that could attract a diversity of butterflies as host plants. These examples were chosen to show the biodiversity of

plants required to support the approximately 150 species of butterflies found in the upper Midwest. But there are a few key families: Plants in the grass family (Poaceae), legume family (Fabaceae), willow family (Salicaceae) and sunflower family (Asteraceae) support over 40, 16, 12 and 10 butterfly species in the region, respectively.

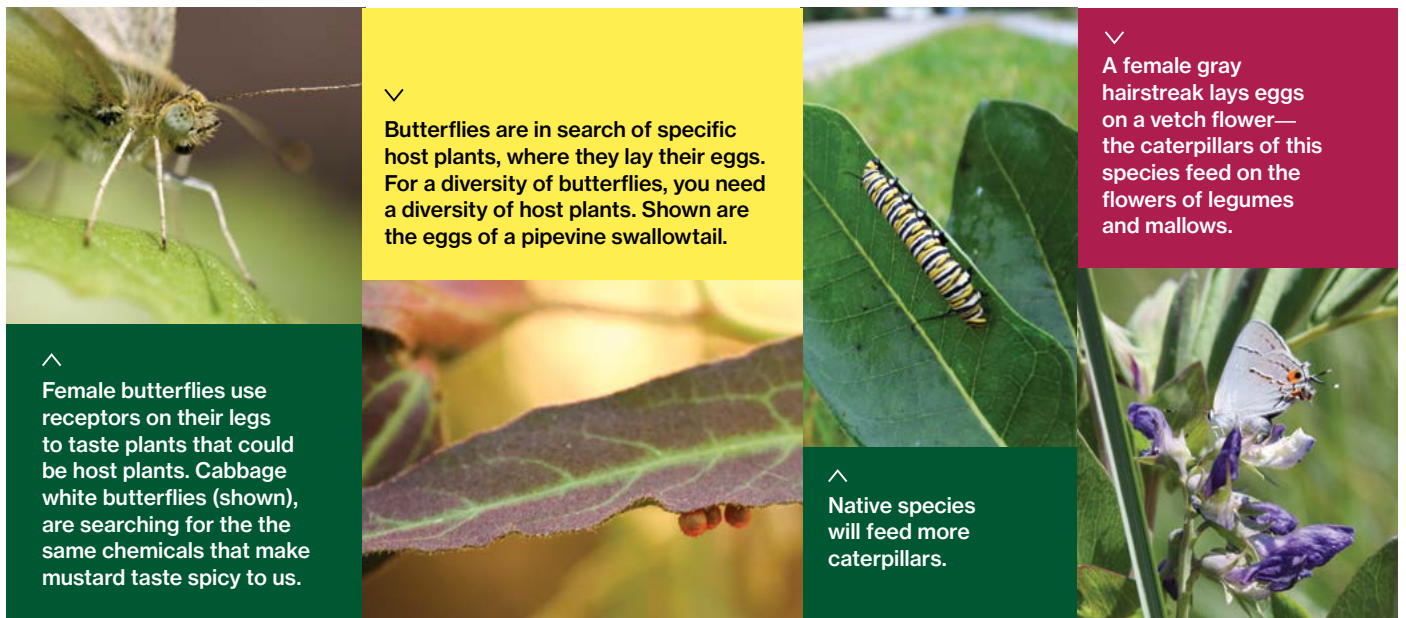
Dealing with nibbles

Providing host plants for pollinators illustrates an interesting tension point for gardeners. We want to attract the beautiful butterflies. But we also don't want them to eat all of our plants. In some cases, the host plants also happen to be the same plants we are eating. For instance, plants in the carrot family (parsley, dill, parsnips) are the host plant for the black swallowtail. And one or two of their caterpillars can decimate a patch of dill that has been preciously cultivated for months.

How can we encourage caterpillars in our garden without worrying about all of our plants being eaten? One answer is to encourage predators at the same time, as they will help keep a healthy balance in your garden. Some of the most effective caterpillar eaters are wasps. You might watch a paper wasp flying up and down a row of kale searching for cabbage white butterfly caterpillars. Not to mention voracious birds—chickadees will collect over 8,000 caterpillars to raise a single set of babies. Holding back on pesticides and providing habitat for birds will keep the beneficial predators around and prevent the caterpillars from taking over your plants.

Photo credits for pages 38-39, Butterfly and native plant:

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∨
Butterflies are in search of specific host plants, where they lay their eggs. For a diversity of butterflies, you need a diversity of host plants. Shown are the eggs of a pipevine swallowtail.

∨
A female gray hairstreak lays eggs on a vetch flower—the caterpillars of this species feed on the flowers of legumes and mallows.

∧
Female butterflies use receptors on their legs to taste plants that could be host plants. Cabbage white butterflies (shown), are searching for the the same chemicals that make mustard taste spicy to us.

∧
Native species will feed more caterpillars.



Zooming in from the landscape view of your garden to the micro level gives a view of the drama that unfolds in your garden as thousands of species live out their lives, finding food and mates, laying eggs and avoiding predators.

Your backyard national park

One of the initiatives that came out of the pollinator gardening craze was the “Homegrown National Park” movement founded by Doug Tallamy. I love this analogy of your yard as your own personal national park. A pollinator garden is an important contributor to the local ecosystem, and it’s just as important to our own wellbeing. We spend orders of magnitude more time at our homes than we do at special visits to national parks. A pollinator garden brings joy in the beauty of flowers, bees and butterflies. It also brings the drama and inspiration we might associate with stopping to watch a bear or bison in a national park.

One of the most fascinating behaviors you can observe in your pollinator garden is a female butterfly searching for a host plant. Most female butterflies live only a week or two as an adult, and they can potentially lay hundreds of eggs in that short time. However, they must find very specific host plants that will support their caterpillars. Their antennae pick up whiffs of host plant smells that put them into host searching mode, a low-fluttering flight where they frequently land on plants. When they land on leaves, they taste with chemoreceptors in their front legs, and this is what they use to tell if that particular plant is a host plant. For instance, cabbage white butterflies can tell a mustard plant by the same chemicals that make mustard taste spicy to us (glucosinolates). If a leaf contains that special chemical, the female

will pause her fluttering for a second to deposit an egg on the underside of a leaf.

Landing on every single plant in a sea of green is an inefficient way to find hundreds of host plants. So most female butterflies also get better at the host-finding process with experience. They learn what colors and shapes are associated with the hosts that are locally common. Because the butterflies must land on plants to confirm they are a host plant, you can watch their search process in action. As they flutter around in your garden, they will land on host plants, but will also make mistakes, landing on non-host plants of similar height or leaf shape.

As you increase the biodiversity of your pollinator garden, you will start to notice more species of butterflies along with their fascinating behaviors as you pause to watch a butterfly in search of a host plant or a wasp on the hunt for a caterpillar dinner. The drama that unfolds can spark wonder and bring an entire new dimension to the experience of your yard and garden. As we notice and learn, we are drawn to do even more—to plant, to grow and to support this amazing ecosystem that we are a part of.

Emilie Snell-Rood is a biologist at the University of Minnesota and has been gardening for decades to feed her family and butterflies.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- + Explore native plants and butterflies in your area using the iNaturalist and Seek apps.
inaturalist.org
inaturalist.org/pages/seek_app
- + Wikipedia classification sidebars show what families different plant species belong to. For example:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asclepias_syriaca
- + Order native plants from Prairie Moon, Blazing Star Gardens and other suppliers.
prairiemoon.com
blazingstargardens.com
- + Register your garden as a 'homegrown national park' or a 'monarch waystation.'
homegrownnationalpark.org/map
monarchwatch.org/waystations/#register


GROWING

FROM SEED



TO SPROUT

NATIVES



Harvest, clean and sow
native seeds to add beauty,
biodiversity and a long list of
benefits to your garden.

STORY **COURTNEY TCHIDA**
PHOTOS **TRACY WALSH**



READY TO START or add to an abundant prairie, woodland or riparian garden this season? Native flowering perennials and grasses are an important element and valuable source of nectar, pollen, seeds and habitat for a sweeping diversity of wildlife and insects. The backbone of our ecosystem, these plants help our natural world flourish.

While native plants can be challenging to start from seed, it's possible with a bit of planning and artificial wintering. Plants that are endemic to Minnesota and the Midwest generally require a period of cold, moist stratification before waking up in the spring. You may think that just scattering seeds where you want them to grow is a good option. Unfortunately, in my experience, this method yields about 1 percent chance of success. Yes, seeds from native perennials need cold and exposure to the natural conditions our winters provide but scattering them also creates opportunities for them to blow away or be eaten by birds, insects and other wildlife.

Quite a few plants, including most grasses and a few flowers like blanket flower, yarrow and wild bergamot, don't require any special conditions to germinate (Prairie Moon's Germination Code: A) and can be planted anytime. Most plants, however, have additional requirements, cold stratification being the most common for anywhere from 10-120 days. Cold stratification requirements can be met artificially in a couple of different ways, either using the winter sowing method or refrigeration.

Once established, native plants are often easy to grow, given they have evolved over time to thrive in Minnesota and Upper Midwest ecoregions. Since 2020, the MN SEED Project has been creating a locally adapted, native, free seed economy and a community practice around saving seeds for endemic pollinator plants. They've helped thousands of northern gardeners identify native plants, collect and clean their seeds responsibly, sow and then transplant into the ground. Here are their top native plant picks and tips for growing each successfully, from seed to sprout.

< Anise Hyssop

Agastache foeniculum

How to identify/collect seed: A couple weeks after hyssop starts blooming, seed production begins. Seeds are easily collected by simply tipping the flowerhead over and tapping them out. If you leave the flowerhead attached it will continue to bloom and produce pollen, nectar and seeds.

How to start seed: Hyssop needs 30 days of cold stratification. The seeds are tiny so leave them on the surface, don't cover them with soil.

Garden benefit: Excellent source of nectar. Attracts bees (including Rusty Patch bumble bees), hummingbirds and butterflies.



Butterfly Flower

Asclepias tuberosa

How to identify/collect seed: Collect in fall when seed pods start to crack open. Easiest to gather before they have cracked all the way open and their fluff spreads them everywhere.

How to start seed: Butterfly flower needs 30 days of cold stratification to germinate.

Garden benefit: Monarch butterfly caterpillar host, attracts bumble bees, solitary bees, hummingbirds and butterflies.

*Prairie
Blazing
Star*



*New
England
Aster*

Ironweed

Vernonia fasciculata

How to identify/collect seed: Collect tufts of seeds after the flower head is dried and rusty colored. Seed will have fluffy awns attached. Benefits from de-awning.

How to start seed: Ironweed needs 60 days of cold stratification to germinate.

Garden benefit: Host plant for the American Painted Lady butterfly caterpillar. Nectar source for bumble bees, solitary bees and butterflies. Seeds also feed birds. Considered by the Xerxes Society to have special value to native bees.



^

Pale Purple Coneflower

Echinacea pallida

How to identify/collect seed: When seed heads are dry or birds have started to peck at them, collect the seedhead by cutting it off from the stem. Once very dry, put the seedhead in a cylindrical container with a small rock or medium/large binder clips. Shake the container and the seedheads will fall apart. The seeds are the lighter tan brown parts, while the darker parts are chaff.

How to start seed: Pale purple coneflowers require 90 days of cold stratification to germinate. These are also best planted outside in the fall.

Garden benefit: Host plant for the Ottoe Skipper butterfly. Nectar attracts butterflies and hummingbirds.

Smooth Blue Aster >

Symphotrichum laeve

How to identify/collect seed: Collect tufts of seeds after the flower head is dried. Seed will have fluffy awns attached. Benefits from de-awning.

How to start seed: No special germination requirements needed.

Garden benefit: Attracts birds and many pollinators. Host plant for the Pearl Crescent and Silvery Checkerspot butterflies.

^

Smooth Solomon's Seal

Polygonatum biflorum

How to identify/collect seed: Seeds found inside fruits in the fall.

How to start seed: Solomon's seal seeds must overcome a double dormancy, meaning they require two cold periods (winters) with a warm moist period in between. These treatments mimic the natural cycle of species that would normally take two to three growing seasons to germinate. These seeds should be refrigerated until planting or starting other treatment.

Garden benefit: Attracts birds and pollinators.

Wild Blue Indigo >

Baptisia australis

How to identify/collect seed: Collect dried pods in late summer to early fall. Remove seeds from pods. Putting the seeds in the freezer for at least a week is recommended to kill any weevil eggs that may be inside the seeds.

How to start seed: Legumes, including clover, indigo and partridge pea, often need scarification, which is the process of abrading their seed coats to aid germination. This is easily done by rubbing the seeds between two pieces of medium-grit sandpaper. 10 days of cold stratification is also required for germination.

Garden benefit: Host plant for Wild Indigo Duskywings. Also attracts bumble bees, solitary bees and hummingbirds.



Wild Columbine

Aquilegia canadensis

How to identify/collect seed: Collect seeds from seedheads in July. The small black shiny seeds often easily pour out of the seedheads.

How to start seed: Wild columbine requires 60 days of cold stratification to germinate. Best planted outdoors in the fall.

Garden benefit: Host plant for columbine Duskywings. Also attracts butterflies, bees and hummingbirds.



Virgin's
Bower

MN SEED PROJECT

MN SEED Project creates a locally adapted, native, free seed economy and a community practice around saving seeds for endemic pollinator plants. In its sixth year, the project hosts workshops year-round on the seasonal seed cycle: collecting in fall, processing, cleaning and swapping in winter, followed by winter sowing in spring. The project gives away free packets of flower and grass seeds—more than 15,000 packets in 2025 alone—at events throughout Minnesota. Learn more at mnseedproject.org.

>

Virgin's Bower

Clematis virginiana

How to identify/collect seed:

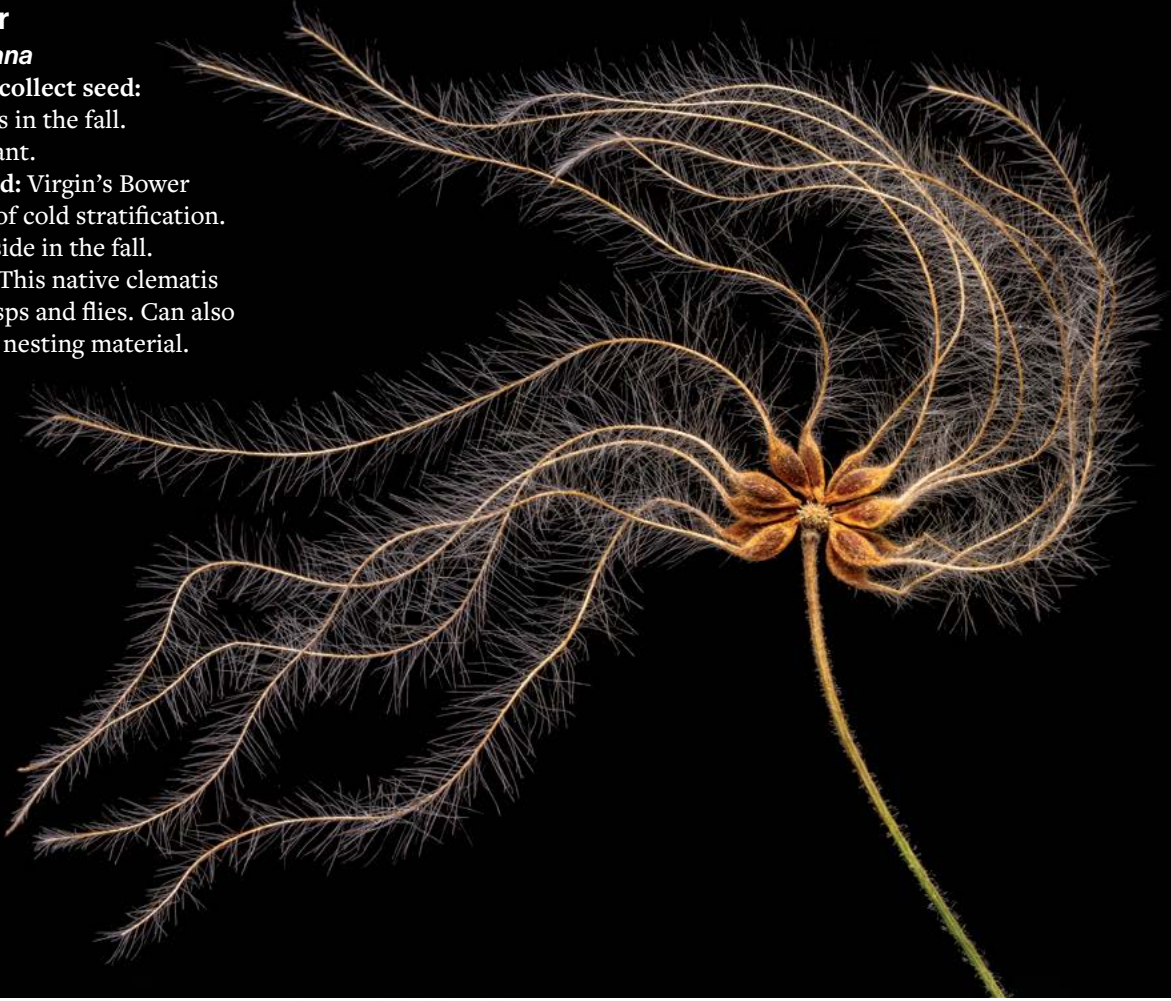
Collect seedheads in the fall.

Break apart to plant.

How to start seed: Virgin's Bower requires 30 days of cold stratification.

Best planted outside in the fall.

Garden benefit: This native clematis attracts bees, wasps and flies. Can also provide songbird nesting material.



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Prairie Blazing Star

Liatris pycnostachya

How to identify/collect seed: Collect the tufts of seeds after the flower head is dried. Seed will have fluffy awns attached. Benefits from de-awning.

How to start seed: Prairie Blazing Star requires 60 days of cold stratification to germinate.

Garden benefit: Attracts hummingbirds, butterflies and bees, including bumble bees, Rusty Patch bumble bees and solitary bees.



NOTES *on* GROWING



ALL SEEDS that require cold stratification can be winter sown or you can use your refrigerator to provide the chill. In this case, it's important to provide a moist medium for the seeds to hang out in—simply putting a seed packet in the refrigerator won't get you the results you desire. You need to use wet vermiculite, sand or coir mixed in with the seeds in a plastic bag or container to hold the moisture in. Labeling is extremely important as is noting on a calendar when to pull them out and plant. I've had success using the refrigerator method for seeds requiring 60 and 90 days of cold and then planting them using the winter sowing method in June and later.

Once the seeds begin to germinate, make sure they don't dry out by watering/spraying them frequently. As the days get longer and warmer, move the little jugs to a shadier area to prevent them from drying out. With this method, letting them develop a strong root system is crucial.

Growing plants that have evolved in your region is one of the most important things you can do to help create resilience and adaptation in the face of climate change in our landscapes for both us and the other creatures we share this world with. The beauty and interactions they create connect us to nature in ways that are so needed in the world right now.

TIPS FOR TRANSPLANTING WINTER & SPRING SOWN PLANTS

As tempting as transplanting baby plants can be in June, waiting until mid-August or even September is often more successful. Wait until there are at least two sets of true leaves. Adding more soil under the existing soil in the container or potting up the seedlings can also help strengthen the seedlings while delaying planting them in their final place in the garden.




▼ **GERMINATION CODE GUIDE**
 Prairie Moon Nursery shares pre-sowing seed treatment methods to spark quicker, more consistent germination. northerngardener.org/germination-codes

Courtney Tchida is a St. Paul, Minn.-based educator, gardener and seed keeper.

Bloom, Buzz, Bang

St. Paul brewers turn a problematic industrial parcel into a prairie rain garden paradise.

STORY **SUSAN M. BARBIERI**
PHOTOS **TRACY WALSH**



A circle grain bin serves as an efficient space that houses the brewery's main tap room.



Clockwise from top left:
1. Patrons park bikes beside a flowerbed. **2.** Bang Brewing Company owners Jay and Sandy Boss Febbo repurposed old railroad ties to create the entryway. **3.** A monarch butterfly enjoys Joe Pye weed. **4.** Guests sip cold brews around salvaged-wood tables.





W

HEN JAY AND SANDY BOSS FEBBO QUIT THEIR OFFICE JOBS over 12 years ago to open a microbrewery that encompassed their passion for organic, regenerative and sustainable agriculture, they knew plenty about brewing beer because they'd been home brewing since the 1990s. They knew less about the challenges of landscaping their parcel in an out-of-the-way industrial area of St. Paul.

So, their Bang Brewing Company began not with a bang but with a barley debacle. "Our landscape idea at that time was that we were going to landscape with a barley field," recalls Sandy. "We thought, 'Cool, we'll have our grain bin brewery surrounded by barley, the ingredient that we use in our beer.'"

They procured organic barley seed, hired someone to break up and till compacted, concrete-like soil, and planted. "To our delight, it started to germinate and then the spring rains literally just washed it out to the street," she says. They regraded and planted tillage radish, vetch and other cover crops. "We did another round of

barley seeds the next spring, and the exact same thing happened."

Clearly, they realized, storm water management is a big deal. The couple reached out to the Capitol Region Watershed District and the Ramsey Conservation District, whose experts visited Bang Brewing on a stormy day and saw firsthand how water flowed over the property. The solution: rain gardens.

Today, Bang Brewing sits amid glorious masses of wildflowers: Joepy weed, snakeroot, rudbeckia, aster, coneflower, prairie clover, three kinds of milkweed, coreopsis, wild bergamot, varieties of sunflower, wild strawberry, larkspur, meadow blazers and button blazers. Chubby bumblebees and fluttering monarch butterflies happily meander from flower to flower.

"Button blazers are the favorite of the monarchs. If we ever have a moment where we have a multitude of monarchs descend, which is magical when it happens, that's what they're sitting on. They love it," Sandy says.

Left to right:

- 1.** A rain garden flanks the patio.
- 2.** Pollinators frequent their coneflower stand.
- 3.** The main beer hall is tucked behind another rain garden.
- 4.** A stand of Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) in front of the split culvert pavilion, which was designed to show how the gardens function during a rainfall—rain runs off the culverts and drips into a suspended gutter which tips back to drain into the south rain garden. It's a cool visual and amazing space to sit in during a gentle rain.

When you stroll around the brewery grounds, you're immediately transported to a bucolic rural Minnesota landscape.



She points out the hyssop, verbane, poppy mallow, wild onion, bluestem and royal catchfly. “We have grown to five stands of royal catchfly now. It’s super hard to get established. Jay worked diligently on that for years. It was a huge victory when that came through.”

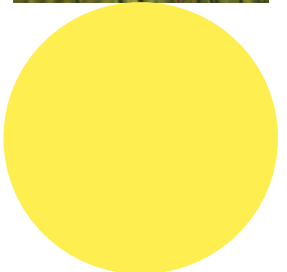
Jay says he has overseeded the gardens “to a crazy extent” to get different species represented. “We’re trying to grow more meadow blazers for the butterflies. We’ve got about 30 or 40 blazers. We have about a third of an acre and I threw enough seed for about two acres,” he says with a laugh. “I’ve sown other seeds in moderation just hoping things would grow and three or four years later the poppy mallow pops up or the larkspur or the coneflowers.”

One year, he asked the city of St. Paul to stop mowing an undeveloped curbside strip across the street so he could harvest seeds from their bee balm and coneflowers and throw them on that strip. Just as he gives when it comes to seeds, he is also known to take. When taking a break in late fall in a park or on a trail, “we might walk around and I take seeds,” he says, a little sheepishly.

Rural mood in the city

When you stroll around the brewery grounds, you’re immediately transported to a bucolic rural Minnesota landscape. The tap room is a charming round grain bin constructed of corrugated galvanized metal. Sandy says she and Jay are “masters of flexible use” in the 1,300-square-foot space, switching efficiently between the setup for brew day or bottling day and making the most of a small space while having fun.

“When we started, we were like, we can make something with this. We’re going to convert this little piece of industrial land into a thing that will support what we want to do in the way that we want to do it,” Sandy says. Meaning brewing organic beer with ingredients from partner farms that practice regenerative, sustainable agriculture. Meaning constructing an ambitious gravel-and-grid water infiltration system that channels runoff into the rain gardens to sustain an urban prairie.





“We had never seen a rain garden go in before and had never seen one in action,” Sandy says, as we stroll past gently waving switchgrass and milkweed. We crunch over a gravelly surface stabilized with black plastic grids that hide a geogrid system deep underneath. “At the end of 2015 we could see the rain hit the garden fill and then percolate down,” she says. No more seeds or baby plants washing into the street.

Their profusion of wildflowers began with plant plugs, a lot of mulch for weed control, and winter seed sowing for native plants that prefer a cold start to their germination process (*see native seed feature on page 42*). Today the rain gardens form a horseshoe around the perimeter of the property and behind the tap room, deeper and narrower along the back and wider on the outside. Bees hibernate in the dried flower stalks during the winter, when the dried bee balm stalks look like snow lollipops, Sandy says.

Punctuating their purpose

Nelco Landscape did every phase of planting and installed the pavilion, a split corrugated culvert shaped a bit like a lowercase “m.” The two arched pieces don’t join in the center; a gutter runs down the middle, channeling rainwater directly into the garden. “It’s a visual reference of what this whole space is meant to accomplish,” Sandy says. “It’s also a ridiculous nod to the name of our brewery. Jay was a software engineer and I worked in design, so in code, an exclamation point is referred to as a bang, and also in typography.”

In their early days of doing small-batch brewing, Jay would start each batch reference with an exclamation point to punctuate their excitement in having another batch underway. They started referring to the batches as bangs, so the brewery

just kind of named itself, Sandy says.

The structures on the west side of the grain bin amid the rolific wildflower gardens also form an exclamation point of sorts. The long metal-roofed pavilion is the line, and the fire pit is the dot, she says. But you’d have to be a bird, bee or butterfly overhead to really see that properly.

Closer to earth are reclaimed timbers from Mill City Road and cobblestone pavers from construction of the University Avenue light rail project, all of which lend texture and patina to the hardscaping in the gardens.

On the east side of the tap room, just past the outdoor pizza oven, is a pole barn that the couple plan to use as a three-season pavilion. The couple commissioned Peyton Scott Russell, the Minneapolis artist who painted the iconic black-and-white George Floyd mural, who chose four local mural artists and supervised them through the painting of the pole barn. The building is a swirl of vivid color that complements the surroundings.

As part of their emphasis on sustainability, Bang Brewing sells beer in returnable 750 milliliter bottles. Though most of their ales, lagers and stouts are consumed on the premises, they do distribute to 13 liquor stores in the Twin Cities. They keep it simple: no swag, seltzers or THC beverages. Spent grains, hops and yeast are reused and recycled, of course, for livestock feed and other uses.

For a bit of garden inspiration, head to the countryside in urban St. Paul, grab a brew from Jay and Sandy, and see what’s blooming and buzzing at Bang Brewing.

“The intense amount of blooms in June and early July is just amazing,” Sandy says.

Above: Stands of yellow-flowering native plants line the main entrance.

Right:

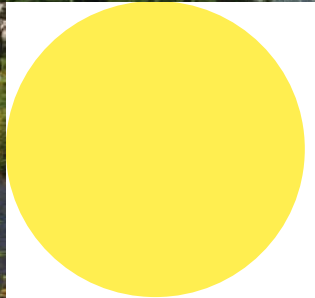
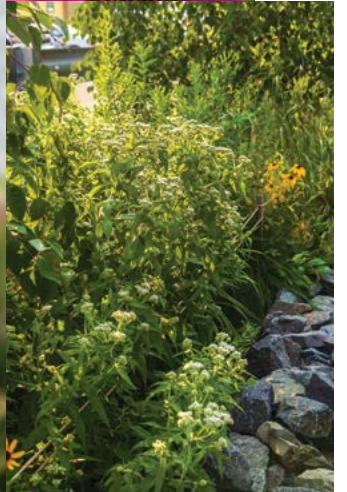
Fire pit areas and the parking lot are hidden behind tall native prairie plants such as coneflower, Joe-Pye weed, *Rudbeckia* and others. Rain gardens are featured around the property. Bean bag toss near event hall invites visitors to play.

Susan Barbieri is a St. Paul, Minn. journalist whose life goal is to create a rabbit-proof garden.

Tracy Walsh is a garden and portrait photographer whose work has appeared in Fine Gardening and HGTV Magazine.

tracywalshphoto.com

When we started, we were like...We're going to convert this little piece of industrial land into a thing that will support what we want to do in the way that we want to do it.





Meadows *with*
STYLE

**Design a native plant garden
with a sense of place and a
wild heart.**

STORY MARY LAHR SCHIER



Viewed from the house, gardens merge into a meadow below filled with *Agastache*, *Echinacea* and *Phlox paniculata*. Above right: A small amount of turf separates the house from gardens and wilder spaces.



NATURALISTIC DESIGN, POCKET PRAIRIES, URBAN MEADOWS, PRAIRIE BORDERS, MODIFIED MEADOWS—no matter the name, this increasingly popular style of gardening has a common and very worthy goal: to create a landscape that feels rooted in its place and ecology, but makes room for humans.

Homeowners who embrace “meadowscaping,” as it’s also called, generally replace part or all of their turf-centric yard with native and near-native flowering plants amid a base of sedges and grasses. The purpose is to restore soil health and support pollinators and other wildlife in a space that looks attractive to neighbors and potentially requires less maintenance than turf. Meadows also provide an opportunity to create a landscape that fits naturally in its environment.

Naturalistic gardening style is about “people wanting to engage deeply with the landscape they live in,” says Kelly D. Norris, an author, horticulturist and garden designer based in Des Moines, Iowa. “The reality is, we all live in a place. It has history. It has ecology. It has fullness and richness.” These gardens embrace that.

Natural gardens connect us more deeply to the land we occupy, but they also tap into human creativity and joy.



A long leash and a clear plan

Modern meadow spaces can be any size—from several acres to a single bed. While larger spaces may have the look of a prairie with more grasses than flowering perennials, taller plants and a more random planting aesthetic, many urban and suburban meadows include designed garden features, such as plants arranged in drifts and groupings; shrubs and trees; patios, stonework and mowed paths to show intention and direct traffic; and benches and other human-scaled features to mediate the wildness. Yard-sized meadows tend to have shorter grasses and perennials, mostly under 4 feet, to allow connection between house and street. They may include tidier cultivars of native species or even a few well-loved and adaptable non-native plants.

These types of gardens aren't achieved by tossing a mix of native plant seeds and seeing what happens. That will produce a meadow of sorts, but not a meadow garden. "I may give landscape plants a longer leash than most gardeners," Norris says of the native gardens he designs, "but it's not hands-off." It requires engagement from the gardener in the form of planning, care and, in the early stages especially, a willingness to weed.

Like any new garden, planning a meadow starts with a site assessment. The new plantings need to fit the ecology of your region and the specifics of your property in order to thrive. Considerations include things like sun or shade, soil types, how the water flows through the site, and what existing plantings and weeds need to be removed or preserved. Gardeners also need to decide which structural features will remain, such as a canopy of trees, sidewalks, pergolas or patios. The history of the site is important, too. For example, if the soil has been heavily fertilized over many years, that will affect your choice of plants. Sometimes, the section of a property where plants struggle the most to grow is the best spot for a meadow, Norris says.

Choose plants carefully

In addition to structural features, meadowlike gardens include a base (or matrix) layer of low-growing plants as well as showier perennials and shrubs to provide colorful flowers and leaves across the season. According to Benjamin Vogt, author of *Prairie Up: An Introduction to Natural Garden Design*, the base layer can include one or more types of grass or sedge, which serve as a green mulch. About 50 percent of the plants on the site should be base plants. Vogt places them 12 inches apart when planting to ensure they can fill in quickly.

Norris recommends about 10 percent of the plants be trees, shrubs and vines with the remainder being perennials that bloom across the seasons. How many different species you choose depends on the size of the space and what kind of look you want to achieve. A wilder look would have more different types and a wider color palette. For a tidier appearance, you might limit the color palette or choose a smaller number of species and repeat them throughout your space.

The plant choices for sunny meadows are abundant, though gardeners should consider how much spreading and weaving the space can tolerate. Anise hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*), for example, will pop up all over the garden in a delightful but persistent way, while blue wild indigo (*Baptisia australis*) tends to stay put. A shady meadow might rely on spring ephemerals, such as Dutchman's breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*), early in the season followed by early meadow rue (*Thalictrum dioicum*), wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*) and short's aster (*Symphotrichum shortii*) and zigzag goldenrod (*Solidago flexicaulis*) in fall. There are choices for every space and gardener.

Norris discourages gardeners from seeing their native plantings as divorced from human enjoyment of the garden. Natural gardens connect us more deeply to the land we occupy, but they also tap into human creativity and joy. "I entertain in my garden all the time," Norris says. "You can have a firepit."

SUMMER
Rattlesnake Master
Eryngium yuccifolium



FALL
Joe Pye Weed
Eutrochium purpureum



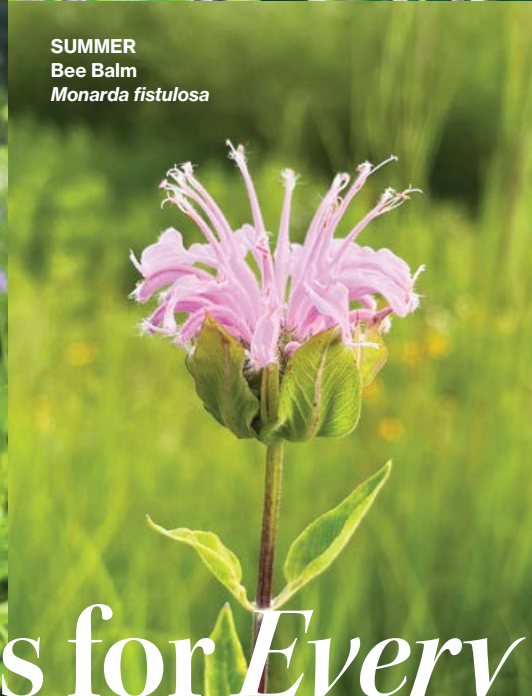
SPRING
Wild Geranium
Geranium maculatum



SUMMER
Gray-headed Coneflower
Ratibida pinnata



SUMMER
Bee Balm
Monarda fistulosa



SPRING
Golden Alexander
Zizia aurea



Blooms for *Every* Season

FALL
New England Aster
Symphotrichum novae-angliae



SPRING + SUMMER
Ohio Spiderwort
Tradescantia ohioensis



SPRING
Columbine
Aquilegia canadensis



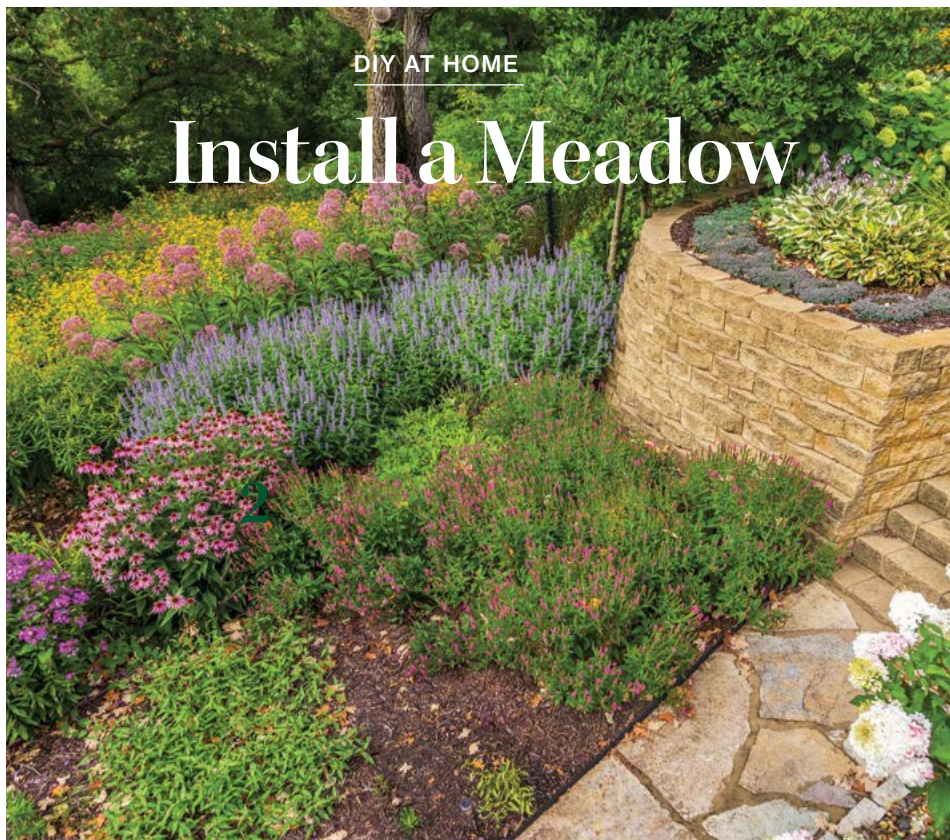
*Naturalistic gardening style
is about people wanting
to engage deeply with the
landscape they live in.*



In this modern interpretation of a prairie, little bluestem forms the base layer of plantings.

DIY AT HOME

Install a Meadow



Design note

A garden bed with native plants arranged in a traditional style has many of the same benefits and aesthetics of a meadow.



ALL PHOTOS TRACY WALSH PHOTOGRAPHY FOR BAILEY NURSERIES EXCEPT PHOTO ON LEFT PAGE BY BENJAMIN VOGT

1 You'll need to remove existing grass or plantings to install a meadow. There are several options for doing this, including herbicides, sheet mulching or solarizing. Each method has benefits and drawbacks, but all of them will help kill off weeds before you put in your new meadow. Do not fertilize or add compost as most native plants do not need it—and some will go into hyperdrive with too much fertility.

2 Because you will need a lot of plants for your project, most naturalistic designers recommend plant plugs or seeds. Draw out a planting plan, especially if you are doing more than a small bed, to determine where you will put which plants. Make sure the entire planting has base layer plants in it. It may help to lay the plugs out where you plan to plant them before digging them in. While natural gardens don't usually need watering after establishment,

plantings should be watered once or twice a week for the first several weeks. If you seed an area, water it daily the first four weeks to encourage germination. You may want to add a thin layer (1 to 2 inches) of mulch to prevent soil runoff.

3 In the first two to three years after planting, weeding is your biggest and most important task. Have patience with your meadow. It will be at least two and up to four years before it matures enough to be really stunning. Starting in the third year after planting, many meadows benefit from a once-a-year mowing or trimming done in the spring.

RESOURCES

Lawns into Meadows: Growing a Regenerative Landscape
by Owen Wormser

Prairie Up: An Introduction to Natural Garden Design
by Benjamin Vogt; online design courses offered at prairieup.com.

Your Natural Garden: A Practical Guide for Caring for an Ecologically Vibrant Home Garden
by Kelly D. Norris

Mary Lahr Schier is a small-space and community gardener in the Twin Cities. Follow her at maryschier.substack.com or on Instagram at [@mynortherngarden_mary](https://www.instagram.com/mynortherngarden_mary).



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