



# Creating a Tapestry Lawn to Benefit Pollinators & Wildlife

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For centuries, lawns consisted of many small plants growing among grasses that were kept low by grazing animals. These plants bloomed at various points thus offering nectar and pollen to insects throughout the warmer seasons. The famous Cloister's Unicorn Tapestry gives us the perfect image of this old style of lawn before mechanical mowers replaced scythes, clippers and sheep. Lawns have their purpose in that they create an easy terrain to maneuver and play on, but the modern sterile lawn offers no benefits to nature. You can enhance your lawn to support wildlife by adding a few beneficial blooming species in out of the way areas and letting the more aggressive flowering ground covers invade the turf. You will still mow, but at a slightly higher level. The plants will just bloom at a lower height and mowing can even encourage their density. Here are some of suggestions for creating a tapestry lawn.

## How to Prepare Your Lawn to Support Pollinators

Adding more flowering species can be done through either a new lawn planting that includes the desired flowers or seeding flowers directly into an existing lawn. Seeding into an existing lawn is more economical but it's more of a challenge to get the plants established as they are competing with the established grass for space. You also have to do some tending of the seed to ensure germination. This involves adequate moisture, good soil to seed contact, proper seed distribution and spreading some chopped straw (not hay) on top to protect new seed

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from birds and heavy rain storms. Most wildflower seed will come with instructions on how to best get your seed started. Here are a few tips:

- 1.) Pick the right flower species based on the conditions of your site. Are there depressions where water pools? Is it in full sun or shade? What type of soil do you have - sandy loam, clay, a mix? These factors dictate the species that can thrive in your site.
- 2.) If you are seeding into an established lawn will need to give the flowers a competitive edge by disrupting the lawn directly before seeding. First do what is called scalping, which means you mow the lawn very short (1.5 in.). This allows more sunlight to hit the soil surface and helps seeds germinate. It also slows down the competition of the established grass as the roots are diverted into putting energy back into reestablishing blades. Yes, this is stressful for the grass, but that's the point.
- 3.) Once you finish sowing the flower seed, it is important that the seeds get adequate moisture to germinate. While meadows are usually done in the fall, this type of seeding can be done in spring when you can take advantage of the April rains; however, it may be necessary to provide supplemental water for 2-3 weeks until the plants have germinated if rain is sparse. Weather will dictate how much you need to water, but typically watering twice a day for 15-20 minutes in the early morning and early afternoon, allowing the new sprouts to dry before nightfall, will keep an adequate moisture level in the soil.

### **Management of a Tapestry Lawn**

A lawn with flowering plants does require some special maintenance. You must always remove any undesirable plants that might show up and try to take over your less aggressive flowering plants. Hand weeding will always be the preferred option for weed control in a flowering lawn and most important is not to let the undesirable plants go to seed or they will become prolific. Sometimes the grass may become too dense and it will have to be cut or pulled out of areas. Overall, most tapestry lawns will create their own balance and you will see some plants will be happier than others. With the exception of invasive plants like stiltgrass and swallow-wort, encourage the happy ones and let nature figure out the rest.

You still mow a tapestry lawn and a height between 3.5 and 4 inches will ensure that flowering plants survive and produce flowers to sustain pollinators. Higher mowing heights have the benefit of reducing the required mowing frequency and will enable the grasses and flowering plants to have a deeper, more robust root system improving the quality and stress tolerance of the lawn. The one third rule is a good guide to help determine mowing frequency: do not cut off more than one third of the vegetation at one time. If the desired mowing height is 4 in., then the lawn should be mowed when it reaches 6 in., cutting off 2 in. or one third. To reduce mowing stress, it is recommended that you maintain sharp mower

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blades to give everything a clean cut and not ragged edges. Leaving clippings on the lawn when mowing will also help to add nutrients back to the soil, so you never have to worry about bagging the cut vegetation. If the cut vegetation is in thick clumps you can thin them out with a quick shake or light raking, but it's usually not necessary.

Once the plants are established you shouldn't have to water unless a drought occurs and even then, if you have picked appropriate species, watering should be minimal. It's generally accepted that 2-3 inches of precipitation per month is enough to sustain the quality of a flowering lawn, assuming the precipitation does not occur all at once. In dry years, irrigation requirements will be greater. If no precipitation occurs over a hot 2-week period, consider irrigating with about an 1 inch of water once a week until rain returns. This can be accomplished with an in-ground irrigation system, portable sprinklers or by hand watering. You can use a portable rain gauge to know how long to water each area.

Fertilizer requirements will be minimal if clippings are returned, mowing heights are kept high, and the soil quality is at least average. If the plants look weak or sparse after a year or two you can add an organic fertilizer that contains a slow release nitrogen. You have to be careful with fertilizer because too much encourage leaves over flowers. For additional nutrients, such as phosphorus, consider having your soil professionally tested.

### **Selection of recommended plants to mix with lawn grass:**

#### **For Sunny, Exposed areas with thin or well-drained soil:**

*Antennaria plantaginifolia* - Pussytoes

*Astragalus crassicarpus* -Ground plum

*Coreopsis lanceolata*- Lanceleaf coreopsis

*Phlox subulata* - Moss Phlox

*Potentilla tridentata* (*Sibbaldiopsis tridentata*) – Wine-leaf Cinquefoil

*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium* - Slender Mountain Mint

*Solidago nemoralis* - Gray Goldenrod

*Symphotrichum lateriflorum*- Calico Aster

#### **For Sunny conditions with average to rich soil:**

*Chrysogonum virginianum* - Green & Gold aka Goldstar

*Coreopsis auriculata* Nana - Mouse Eared Coreopsis

*Fragaria virginiana* - Wild Strawberry

*Nemophila maculata* - Five Spot Buffalo Eyes (self-seeding annual)

*Nemophila menziesii* - Baby Blue Eyes ( self-seeding annual)

*Prunella vulgaris* ssp. *lanceolata* -Lanceleaf self-heal

*Viola soraria* - common blue violet or named variety like "Freckles" (also takes shade)

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*Waldsteinia fragarioides* – Barren Strawberry

**Not Native to North America, but still useful for pollinators in lawns:**

*Trifolium repens*- Dutch White clover

*Thymus serpyllum* - Creeping Thyme

*Trifolium fragiferum* - Strawberry Clover

*Chamaemelum nobile*- Anthemis nobilis

*Arjua reptans* - go for a good flowering variety like “Black Scallop”, “Chocolate Chip” or “Blueberry Muffin”

**Instead of grass for Shady, Woodland conditions with rich soil:**

*Asarum canadense* - Wild Ginger

*Carex pensylvanica* - Pennsylvania Sedge (can also be used in dry shade)

*Chrysogonum virginianum* - Green & Gold aka Goldstar

*Mitchella repens* - Partridge Berry

*Phlox stolonifera* - Creeping Phlox

*Sedum ternatum* - Stonecrop

*Tiarella cordifolia* - Foamflower

*Paxistima myrsinites* - Mountain lover (also good for dry acid soils even under Pines)

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