A Tale of Converting Lawn to Meadow

*This is a section of the lawn that the homeowners decided to transform, with non-native pear trees removed and the stumps ground. (*All photos by Larry Cohen*)*

Two years ago, we decided to convert a portion of our yard to meadow. The main reason for this project was to create an eco-friendly environment for pollinator insects, birds, and other animals while reducing stormwater runoff.

*The next steps were to plant native trees on the site (*left*) and then to prepare the soil (*right*).*

Why eliminate grass?

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), there are more than two million acres of grass lawn in the state.

Lawns are environmentally and ecologically unsound. Fertilizers and other chemicals used to preserve a lawn's appearance can damage the soil and enter the watershed. Since it replaced something else, perhaps farmland, pasture, or forests, turf grass is not part of our natural landscape. Grass provides no biodiversity: Pollinators cannot use it; birds cannot nest in it; animals neither obtain food from it nor suitably use it as habitat.

Conversion of lawns to meadows introduces ecological diversity by providing a welcome habitat for birds and pollinator insects. Lawn-to-meadow conversions can assure less contaminated groundwater and more effective stormwater control. Meadows are more drought-tolerant than turf grass, can cope with hotter summers, and, in fact, require very little maintenance. They can also be beautiful.

Seeds were applied in late fall (left). *The following May, the meadow was well established* (right).

Conceptualizing and Implementing a Plan

Meadow conversion is not an overnight project. Our decision to move forward with conversion started after a presentation hosted by Lower Frederick's Environmental Advisory Council (EAC) on the concept.

The presenter explained the benefits of reducing our grass-dominant landscape and the long-term cost savings from reduced lawn maintenance.

Each homeowner's situation is different. In our case, we were unhappy with our property's existing landscaping, especially the loss of numerous non-native trees over the years from disease and other issues. In 2023, we

consulted with a local landscape designer who developed a plan that combined a diverse selection of native trees and a suggested meadow seed mix. The plan called for replacement of non-native trees with native species, such as viburnum, swamp white oak, dogwood, red maple, bald cypress, and redbud. The trees would then provide some shade for the meadow and habitat for birds and insects.

After the new trees were planted, in the summer of 2023 our landscaping contractor began prepping for the meadow itself by getting rid of the grass. Killing grass is not easy. One way to eliminate it is to suffocate it with a plastic or cardboard covering. Another method is to apply an herbicide that would not have long-term soil impact. By late autumn, most of the grass had been eliminated. Then, the contractor tilled the soil and prepared it for application of a specialized meadow mix. We chose this mix to have various blooming times over the season and to have the best combination to attract pollinators and birds.

By early spring 2024, the meadow ground cover began to emerge. Even in the meadow's first growth season, different types of pollinator insects and birds appeared. As an extra benefit, there was less lawn to mow.

Information about lawn-to-meadow conversion is available from DCNR (scroll to the link at the bottom of the page), local landscape professionals, and various nonprofit organizations.

~ Larry Cohen

Come June, a mix of blooms and foliage had emerged.

At last, a pollinators' paradise!