

GARDENING LETTERS by Doug Green

This month, instead of writing about the vegetable garden as I am wont to do this time of year, I thought I would sound off about a growing pet peeve of mine - the meadow lawn.

Now do not get me wrong. I am not against meadow lawns; they can be quite attractive at the right time of year and if done properly, but what irks me is the growing body of gardening articles written by people who have never actually grown a meadow lawn but who are simply popularizing a "new" idea. Let me give you some data gleaned from our experience and the experiences of other commercial growers.

Firstly, you do not need a lawn the size of a meadow to have a meadow lawn. In fact, it's often easier to have a very small "meadow" to start with. They are easier to start, grow and maintain. Once the basic area is started, it can be expanded as the time and efforts of the gardener dictate. Any size will do to start.

What is a wildflower? Well, I guess this question answers easier than most - it's any plant native to our area. To stretch a point, you could grow any native Canadian or Northeastern States plant which will survive here. Generally speaking, as long as it survives and is not invasive, grow it in your "wildflower lawn." Note that the purists would cringe at that, insisting that you only grow plants native to your bio-region, but, what the heck - a garden lawn is a garden lawn.

Are wildflowers easy to grow? Yes and no. They are not particularly easy to start but, once started, they can be maintained relatively easily with only minor maintenance. A fall mowing to clean up the stems and spread the seed pods around is generally all the work you have to do.

Can I buy a wildflower mix and just spread it around? How about a "Meadow in a Can"? Nope. Sorry about that, but it's not that simple. The wildflower mixes that come in a can are usually heavy with annual seeds, for example, Marigolds, so that you will get a fast catch and some flower the first year. If you spread it around without killing all the grasses and weeds, the perennial flowers will not be able to compete with the grasses and, generally speaking, it's a waste of money. If you buy a meadow mix suited for the western U.S. or Canada, it will not have the proper ecological system to support it here in Eastern Canada.

I guess the important question then is how does a gardener achieve those stunning effects that are seen in the gardening magazines? How can I really

tell what will grow together? Will the ajuga really get overgrown by the echinacea?

Step one: this is from experience and also recommended by Andre Viette, one of the U.S.'s top nurserymen. Clean the soil of all weeds and other growth. Step one, kill the grass and get rid of all plants you do not want. If you do not start with a clean garden area, you are doomed to waste your money. Personally, I recommend "Roundup" as a good garden plant eradicant. It kills any plant it touches so one has to be careful using it, but it will give you a clean area.

Step two: identify the plants that you want to have in your meadow.

Step three: buy the seed from reliable seed companies or purchase started plants from a nursery. Seed is economical for big plantings; started plants are best for smaller ventures. If you have to buy a mixture from a seed company, by all means make sure that you buy one that fits this geographical zone.

I know that our own "natural" garden has been an interesting experiment - generally speaking, it resembles a weedy meadow. We used to throw the extra seedlings into the area as well as the extra seeds from our own commercial plantings. I knew I had to get rid of this area when a visitor remarked that I had a lot of weedy areas in my nursery area. Unfortunately then, no more naturalized areas for us in sight of the greenhouses.

Once the plants are started, upkeep is minimal. Spot weeding will remove noxious weeds, mowing can be done in the fall to encourage seed distribution or you can mow in the early spring and enjoy the "beauty" of a winter seed pod garden. I think this is just messy. I have been reading books about winter garden beauty and, frankly, having seed pods sticking up around the place reminds me of all the weeds I did not pull this summer. Fall mow.

You can get a lot of enjoyment out of a well planned meadow - reduced lawn mowing, never watering your lawn, taking cuttings for the house for fresh and dried flowers. Just remember that you cannot just chuck out the seed and expect it to happen.

On a more positive note, this is the first year that I have really started to grow some roses in my own gardens and I thought I would pass this information about the rose to you. The rose was dedicated to Venus, the goddess of Love. It became the symbol of secrecy (you want to keep your love life secret), and the expression "under the rose" came from that. This expression means to keep the conversation secret. It also became the symbol of immortality and is often associated with

Christ in early Church literature. Naturally you have heard about the "Wars of the Roses" in English history, between the "Red" and the "White" and only ended by establishing the Tudor kings on the throne.

Well, we do not have any wars going on in our garden, but we are enjoying the roses bred in Ottawa by Dr. Svedja. I am referring to the Explorer series of hardy roses which can thrive quite nicely in our climate without a lot of fuss. I recommend them to you without hesitation. We are also growing the rose "Bonita" which won an All American Rose Award last year and this is quite a good hardy rose as well.

You will be able to see the roses as well as quite a few other plants if you come to the nursery to see our Iris display. We are opening up the commercial propagation nursery for the first two weeks in June to the public. Come out on the weekend and see our 200 varieties of Iris. Our own collection of herbaceous plants is in the nursery and these are also open for your interest. I'll look forward to seeing you.

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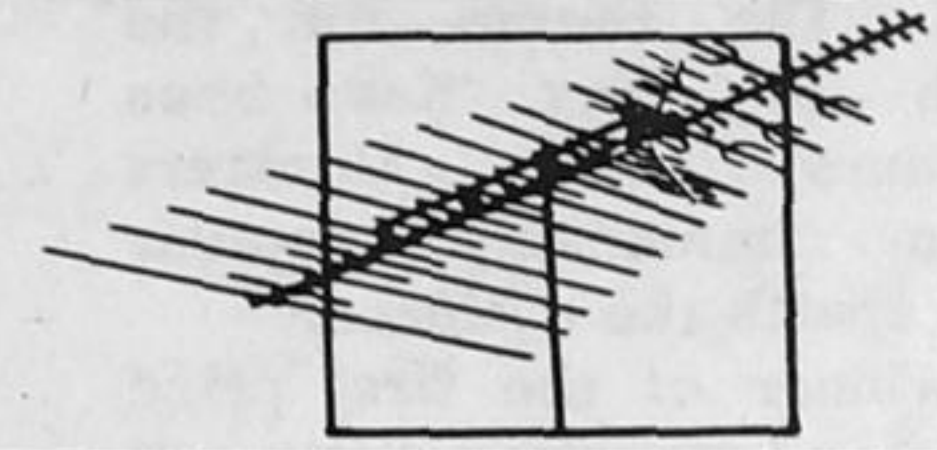
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