

Conservation Matters

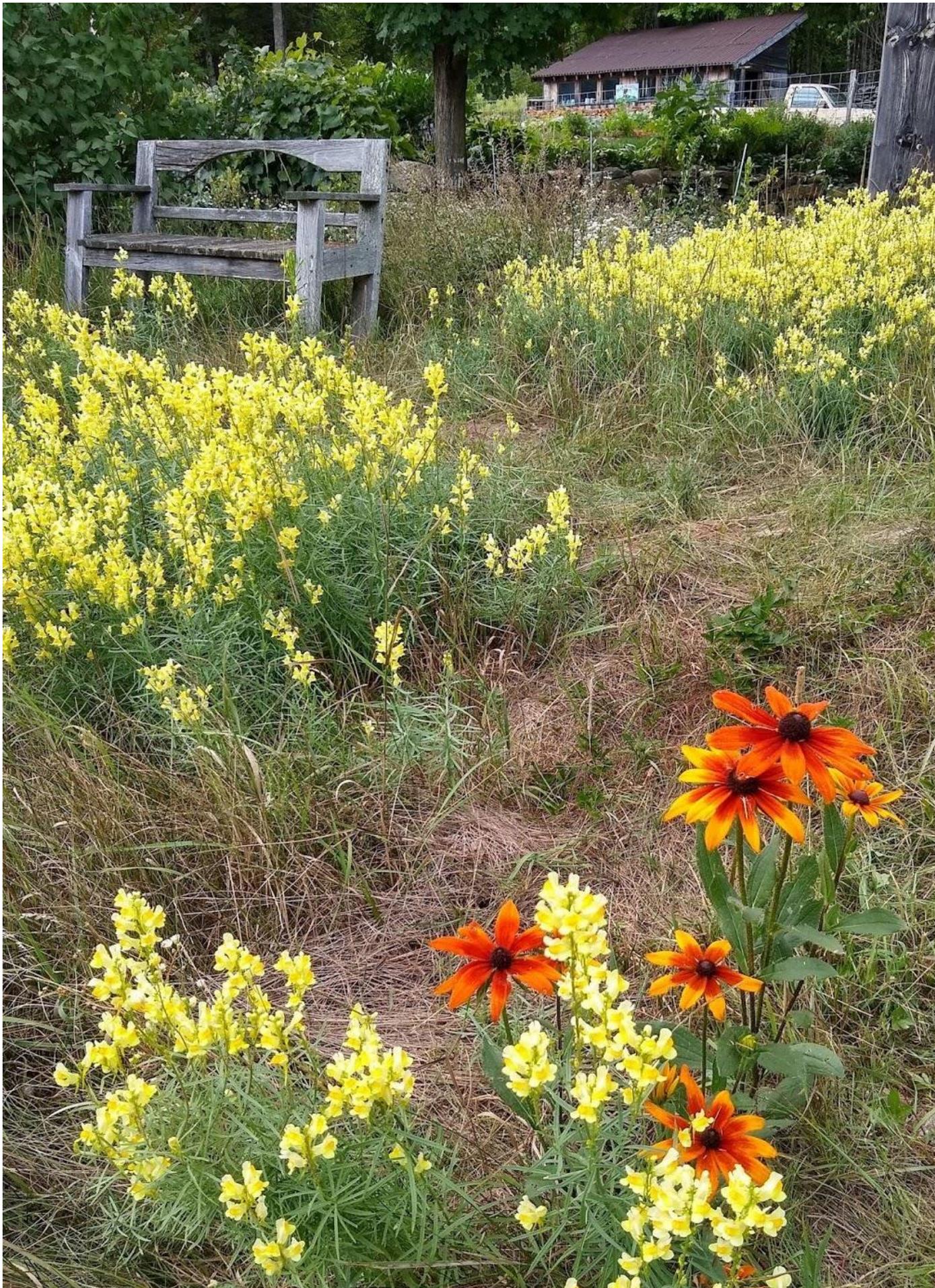
Title: Rewilding My Lawn

Written by: Dilys Morris, Alexandria Conservation Commission

Have you noticed that lawns are getting bigger and bigger? And down at the local building supply store the mowers are getting bigger and bigger too? They feature cushy padded seats, up to 60" mower decks, diesel or gas engines and even a cup holder - bigger, faster, more powerful! Fertilizers and herbicides are applied to encourage only the perfect, uniform blades of grass desired to achieve vast expanses of golf course-like lawns. What were once fields, woods or meadows surrounding a house are increasingly uniformly mowed grass. Off in the distance you might spot the homeowner seated on a wide mower barreling back and forth to keep it so.

Back in Old England, lawns around the manor house signaled wealth. If you owned enough land that you could waste some on nonproductive grass, and could keep gardeners to cut it with hand powered tools, you must be pretty well-to-do. Ladies and gentlemen of leisure could stroll aimlessly on lovely lawns surveying their estates while the lower classes labored in the fields. The aesthetic continues to be popular today. Drive down any residential street - postage stamp or five acre lots - and neatly mowed lawns are the standard. Some neighborhood associations dictate rules about how high your grass can be. In wealthy areas, lawn services can be seen utilizing industrial class grass cutting machines. Tall grass and weeds are seen as a sign of sloth or human absence.

I propose we rethink this manicured lawn ideal. My thinking and preferences about grass and lawns have evolved over the last several years in favor of rewilding much of my yard into natural meadows. It started when I retired a few years back and decided I could no longer afford to pay someone to mow my grass. I thought, "It will be good exercise" -and it was! I would mow in front of the house one day, out back another and around the gardens and in our small orchard, on another. So far so good. But it wasn't long before one thing or another conspired to interfere with my good intentions. It was too hot or too rainy, or I was busy, or the mower wouldn't start, or I was tired. I wouldn't get to the orchard by the time the grass in front needed mowing again. So would I let it go for a bit. By the time I got through my rotation again, the grass in the orchard was too long for the mower to get through. And, in the now tallish grass there were daisies and buttercups budded and almost ready to bloom. So that was that - I wasn't going to mow the flowers down - so less grass to mow and a wildflower meadow happening! I started to think seriously about what other areas I could stop mowing and allow the grass and whatever else wanted to be there to grow. Little by little I let a little strip by the fence go natural, and then that area behind the barn, and then that big area along the driveway. Nowadays I mow only a neat square in front of the house that is bordered by perennial flower beds, right around the blueberry bushes, a little patch under the clothesline and pathways through my now glorious wildflower meadows.



Win - win - win - win! In so many ways I win and we all win! Right off the top, I have less work to do, more time and energy for other things. I save money, less gas for the mower, less wear and tear on the equipment. I can continue to get by with my old walk-behind mower. No need for a big ride-on mower here! The biggest pay-off for me is the beautiful wildflowers and wildlife that are thriving all around me. The meadows are filled with daisies, violets, asters, fleabane, black-eyed Susans, evening primrose, milkweed, dandelions, butter-and-eggs, and Queen Ann's lace. There are more I haven't yet identified and still more appearing like magic. I have a new phone app for wildflower identification, the latest wildflower to debut is -wait for it- "purple headed sneeze weed"! The flowers are abuzz with flying, hopping and fluttering insects of all kinds. It's interesting to watch which flowers draw which bees and butterflies. I'm still working on my butterfly ID repertoire. The latest is the Meadow Fritillary. Look it up! And birds love the wilder areas too. Goldfinches perch on long stems looking for flower seeds. Hummingbirds find nectar among the flowers. The rewilded meadows are full of life compared to my old mowed grass and I am loving it! Everywhere I look there is something lovely or interesting or new. The shaggy, unorganized look of my yard seems more beautiful to me all the time.

No doubt, you see many of the conservation aspects to this little story about rewilding my lawns. Less petroleum used is a plus, multiplied by all the lawns across the country and it's huge! (One statistic- according to the University of Vermont, folks in the US use 600 million gallons of gasoline for lawn mowing annually!) Less mowing means less resources used to build ever bigger mowing machines. Lawn fertilizer and herbicide run-off pollutes waterways. Lawns are often irrigated, adding up to millions of gallons of water country wide. Meadows need no watering and, in fact, retain water in the soil. Best of all, wildflower meadows are fabulous habitats full of diversity - plants, insects, birds and even small animals. In a world that is losing diversity and habitat at an alarming rate, each of us can do our bit to reverse that trend and be rewarded with a little more nature up close and personal!

If you want to do a little rewilding of your own, here are a few tips. First, pick an area and just stop mowing. It should have pretty good sun if you want flowers. Some flowers just appear, the seeds having floated in on the wind or been dropped by birds. I make a habit of noticing wildflowers along the roadways or field edges when I am out and about. I'll stop and pick a few seed heads of blooms that have gone by, break them up and sprinkle the seeds where I hope they will grow in my yard. I often throw out a few handfuls of sunflower seeds. No need to dig them in. Nature will do the work. There are variety packs of wildflower seeds available for sale but I have not found them to be very productive. Don't worry about the soil. Most wildflowers grow well in poor soil. Wild areas should be mowed once or twice a year to keep trees and bushes from growing - in my area, blackberries have to be controlled. I do it once in the spring with a weed whacker or scythe before anything starts growing. I mow pathways through and around my meadow areas for easy walking and habitat gazing. Halfway through the summer I stop mowing and the paths fill with low-growing white clover. Be patient. It will take a few years to build a lot of diversity. The rewards are so worth it! Happy rewilding!!

