



Southeastern
Pennsylvania

May-June 2026 Newsletter

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Re-Thinking No-Mow May

Several years ago, “No-Mow May” was all the rage. It’s true that less mowing reduces air pollution from gas-powered mowers and trimmers, and it might reduce watering needs because a longer lawn won’t show drought stress as quickly. Some municipalities even established programs that waived weed ordinances for the month. But there are other ways to accomplish these goals without the downsides of No-Mow May.

What are those downsides? For starters, No-Mow May doesn’t really accomplish its intended purpose, which is to provide more food for early pollinators. When lawn is allowed to grow, seeds that are dormant in the soil have a chance to sprout and compete for light and water. As with any seeds, some sprout and grow faster than others.

If you’ve grown a native plant meadow from seed, you know that most natives take a while to emerge, and they grow slowly the first year while they establish roots. The gardener’s job during that initial year is to prevent fast-emerging weeds from overtaking the slower growing natives.

Unless your lawn was built on former prairie land, there are no native seeds waiting to sprout. What’s there are seeds of common turf grass weeds -- dandelion, spurge, bittercress, lesser celandine, purslane, chickweed, black medic, nutsedge, clover, spurge, Johnson grass, crabgrass -- the list goes on. This is what will sprout if you stop mowing.

There’s very little pollinator value to these plants, compared to what you can accomplish by rethinking your lawn. One month of longer grass, dandelions, and other nonnative weeds is not going to fill your yard with pollinators. You also risk alienating your neighbors and attracting unwanted attention from the municipal zoning officer.

Rethink and Shrink

A better way to reduce mowing and watering and benefit pollinators is to rethink and shrink your lawn. Most residential properties consist of hardscape (sidewalks, patios, decks), shrubs along the foundation, a few trees, and lots of lawn. The hardscape is functional, and the shrubs and trees can be native plants, but what purpose does the lawn serve? Here’s where you think about how you use your property.

The outdoor areas of your property should be functional and attractive. If you want a lawn for outdoor play, decide how large that space needs to be. Turf grass can also serve as pathways between and around native plantings, giving you an opportunity to admire the plants and wildlife through the seasons. Mowed paths should be at least 4 feet wide. Paths through meadows can be wider, because tall grasses can flop into the path.



WO SEPA 2026 CALENDAR

June 19 Meet-up, Bondsville Mill Park

Sept. 17 Nanoforests. Webinar, 7 p.m.

Watch recordings of past programs on our [YouTube channel](#).

Paths between native planting areas can also be covered with wood chips or pavers. In wooded areas, the natural leaf cover is enough.

Once you've decided which areas of lawn you want to keep, the next step is to figure out what to plant in place of the rest of the lawn. Cornell University is trialing a native lawn, which is a mix of low-growing native grasses, sedges, and perennials. This planting will tolerate some foot traffic and requires mowing only once a year. Hand weeding will still be needed, especially in areas under trees where birds perch.

Another turf grass alternative is native sedges. A 2022 report by Mt. Cuba Center evaluated many native sedges and determined that several commonly available species can be mowed to simulate the look of a lawn. Native fine-leaved sedges that tolerate bi-weekly mowing are *Carex radiata*, *C. pennsylvanica*, *C. socialis*, and *C. woodii*. All are clumping species, so a mowed sedge lawn won't have the foot-feel of turn grass, but it will be every bit as visually attractive, with enormous benefits for native insects.

These sedges can also be allowed to grow without mowing, forming an attractive flowing groundcover. *C. pennsylvanica* is shown below interplanted with *Penstemon digitalis*.



Where can you replace traditional grass with a non-turfgrass lawn?

- Next to the road, where you don't want your kids to play anyway
- Under your mailbox
- Along edges and in corners of your property
- Where it's too wet to grow turfgrass
- Under trees where grass doesn't grow well

There are several techniques for replacing lawn with natives, but letting the lawn go wild isn't one of them. Smothering with cardboard topped with wood chips is very effective, and the area can be replanted right away. Other options include solarizing; removing grass with a shovel or sod cutter; and weed-whacking to bare dirt, followed by a 6-inch layer of compost or 12 inches of leaves.

Manage Your Lawn for Pollinators

Even your traditional lawn areas can be managed to be more friendly to pollinators and other native insects. The most significant step you can take is to avoid pesticides and herbicides, even "natural" ones. These chemicals kill native insects, by direct contact or by poisoning the food they eat. Studies show that insecticides containing neonicotinoid compounds kill beneficial insect by poisoning the pollen, nectar, and leaves they eat.

Some native plants can co-exist in turf grass lawns to provide food and shelter for native insects.



Violet (*V. sororia*, right) is the host plant for many species of fritillary butterflies.

Manage your lawn to allow these natives to thrive by mowing higher. Most natives don't need a lot of fertilizer. Using a mulching mower to leave grass clippings on the lawn might be all the fertilizer you need. Natives also don't need a lot of water.

Lawns don't contribute in any significant way to supporting the relationships between native plants and insects. Think about where you really need lawn, and where you can nurture landscapes that build native biodiversity and ecological integrity.

RESOURCES

[Native Lawn Demonstration Area](#)

[Carex for the Mid-Atlantic Region](#)

[The Risk of Insecticides to Pollinating Insects](#)

[The Best \(and Fastest\) Ways To Replace Your Lawn](#)

Designing for Habitat Value

Whether you're designing a new planting area or filling in an established one, it's important to think beyond "which plant do I want here" to consider whether you're filling all the layers of the planting. In natural systems, plants don't grow in isolation. They coexist in an ecosystem, whether it's a meadow, forest, or even a rocky outcrop. Each layer of plants contributes value to the other plants -- shade, nutrients, protection from predators -- as well as to the insects and animals that depend on the system.

Designing in layers will produce an attractive planting, but the real reason to do it is to ensure that you're providing maximum habitat. After all, that's why we plant natives.

To design for habitat, look at your planting to see which layers are missing.

Groundcover

Groundcover is more than just replacing plants with mulch. Nonliving ground cover (stick, fallen leaves, decaying wood) is an important component of any ecosystem, because this layer supports the insects and microorganisms that turn this material into soil and nutrients that can be used by other living things.

When planting a new area, we often try to replicate this nonliving ground cover by using wood chips or fallen leaves in between plants. As the plants mature, they produce their own fallen leaves and woody debris. At that point, we can stop adding "mulch" and keep adding more plants.

Groundcover plants aren't just fillers between and underneath other plants. Their leaves and root systems serve as the first line of defense in reducing stormwater runoff and soil erosion. They also suppress many weeds by shading out seedlings and out-competing their root systems before they can become established. However, many weeds succeed because they can compete successfully in a crowded environment, so native plantings still need to be weeded.

Dense plantings support more insects, even in small areas. Density also buffers extremes in soil and air temperature, making the entire plantings more resilient to stress caused by heat, cold, or drought.

Golden ragwort (center) and anise hyssop (top left), along with sedges, cover most of the ground in a woodland garden that includes volunteer spicebush and wild cherry trees.



Landscape Maintenance

Mounds of plants surrounded by commercial triple-ground mulch can feed some pollinators, but this type of planting will provide very little habitat for insects, birds, and other animals. Insects rely on fallen leaves, hollow stems, and decaying branches for shelter and overwintering habitat. Birds, salamanders, snakes, and small mammals in turn rely on those insects for food. If the ground under your plants doesn't include decaying vegetative material, you likely won't have a lot of birds and salamanders in your garden.

You can change the timing of your maintenance practices to create more habitat. Instead of raking leaves out of your garden, leave them in place so their nutrients can feed your plants. Leave seed heads to feed the birds, and leave spent stems standing over winter. Cut stems back only after new growth has started, and leave them lying on the ground to allow overwintering insects to hatch out. Plant densely, and allow plants to reseed so that most of the ground is covered.

Rethinking Garden Design

Instead of thinking about which new plants you want, think about which layers should be added. The groundcover layer protects the soil from erosion and runoff, and replenishes nutrients. The middle layer (shrubs or tall forbs) provides food and shelter. The canopy (the tallest plants, whether they're trees or meadow grasses) provides some shade as well as additional habitat. Planting in layers increases plant density and protects and nourishes soil, creating an interconnected system that provides four-season habitat for wild creatures.

Groundcover Plants

Building on the premise that groundcover plants aren't just fillers between and underneath other plants, below are some groundcover plants that are relative easy to establish. Some are easily found in native plant nurseries. Others are volunteers you may notice as your plantings mature and the invasive weed seed bed gives way to native volunteers that seed in with the help of wind, insects, and animals.

The leaves and root systems of these plants serve as the first line of defense in reducing stormwater runoff and soil erosion. They also suppress many weeds by shading out seedlings and out-competing their root systems before they can become established.

Nursery Finds These plants should be available at most nurseries that carry native plants. Some can be grown from seed. These natives are largely ignored by deer and rabbits.

Woodland stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*) is a versatile groundcover that will tolerate nearly any well-drained soil conditions, including drought, heat, rocky soil, and poor soil. It will adjust to light levels from full sun to full shade, but it maintains better form in part to full sun. Sprays of starry white flowers appear above the low succulent foliage in spring. Stonecrop spreads slowly to form a semi-evergreen mat under taller plants or spilling over rocks.

Jacobs ladder (*Polemonium reptans*) emerges as rosettes of delicate compound leaves that quickly send up multiple stalks of small starry lavender flowers. It flowers early, like a spring ephemeral, but the foliage remains all summer. This plant reseeds freely where happy. It mixes well in woodland settings with golden Alexander (*Zizia aurea*, below), another willing self-seeder in part shade and woodland soil.



Wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) is a deciduous native of rich woodlands. Its large heart-shaped leaves and a dense root system form a solid ground cover in the shade. Ants disperse the seeds, so you might find new clusters of wild ginger in other locations. This tells you something about ants as well as about soil and light conditions in the new location.



Pussytoes (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*) quickly forms a mat of ground-hugging grey-green leaves topped by single stalks of fuzzy white flowers in May. This plant needs full sun in well-drained, gravelly soil. It is a host plant for the caterpillars of the American Painted Lady butterfly.



Ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) and **sensitive fern** (*Onoclea sensibilis*) are both willing volunteers in semi-shaded moist woods and similar understory conditions. Ostrich fern forms large vase-shaped multi-stem clumps (right), whereas sensitive fern sends up individual stalks from rhizomes and spreads in all directions. Both species can be aggressive in wet areas but are effective in crowding out most competitors.



Golden ragwort (*Packera aurea*) is an especially useful groundcover because it is mostly evergreen. Plants spread via rhizomes that suppress weeds and might even out-compete lesser celandine. A colony of ragwort blooming in a woodland is a stunning sight.



Sedges (*Carex* spp.) are workhorses when it

comes to covering the ground. Many are semi-evergreen, retaining their leaves into early winter and greening up quickly in the spring. Rapid spreaders include *C. pennsylvanica*, *C. appalachica*, *C. blanda* (common wood sedge), *C. flaccosperma* (blue wood sedge), and *C. muskingumensis* (palm sedge).

Prostrate heath aster (*Symphyotrichum ericoides* var. *prostratus*) looks like a fine-needled evergreen mat until it covers itself with tiny white flowers in early fall, when it virtually vibrates with pollinators. Asters are a keystone plant and host close to 100 species of butterfly and moth larvae. The late-season

flowers provide food for migrating and overwintering insects. This plant needs



sun and well-drained soil and does best when cascading down slopes or over rocks (above).

Wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*) is just as much a spreader as its cultivated cousin. Its small berries are quickly eaten by birds and mammals, and the leaves are sometimes browsed by deer and rabbits. The fast-growing groundcover spreads by above-ground runners and prefers sandy loam. The leaves turn an attractive burgundy in fall.

Native Volunteers

You likely won't find these plants for sale in nurseries, but they might appear in your garden courtesy of the wind or traveling animals. As an added bonus, most of them are not bothered by deer.

Enchanters nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*) grows 1 to 3 feet high and can form thick carpets in shady woods. Spikes of tiny white flowers rise above the leaves in summer. Its dense root system protects soil from erosion.



Virginia smartweed

(*Persicaria virginiana*) is easily identified in spring, when pairs of pointed leaves are marked with distinctive dark chevrons. These can fade as the leaves mature. Slender wands of tiny white flowers top the plants in summer. Virginia smartweed tolerates clay, sand, and dry soil, preferring part to full shade.

Celandine poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*) can cover the forest floor with clumps of large, deeply lobed blue-green leaves that can reach 2 feet in height. Bright yellow flowers appear in early spring, before trees leaf out, and sometimes reappear in late fall. The plant is easy to grow and stays green throughout the summer unless stressed by extreme drought. Plants propagate by seed to form large colonies. Ants also carry seeds to suitable habitat far from the parent plant.

Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) is a vigorous vine that can climb walls, fences, and trees but is also an effective ground cover under taller plants. Its leaves emerge relatively late, after the trees have leafed out. Its large, five-lobed leaves turn a brilliant orange, red, or purple in fall. It tolerates a wide range of soils as long as they're not waterlogged. It is a vigorous grower that can out-compete other groundcovers if not kept in check.

Wild violet (*Viola sororia*) is prolific and adaptable, and its flowers are an important early source of nectar for pollinators. It self-seeds freely, preferring well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. It tolerates clay but often goes dormant when confronted with an extended period of drought. Violets are host plants for a wide range of fritillary butterflies.

Tree of the Month -- Dogwoods

Native dogwoods are important components of natural landscapes in the eastern United States. These understory species play an important role in enhancing biodiversity and restoring ecosystems from upland forests to wetlands.

The dogwood's fibrous root system, particularly in shrubby species like silky and red osier dogwood, helps anchor soils prone to erosion, reducing sedimentation in waterways and protecting water quality and aquatic habitat. Reintroducing dogwoods into degraded wetlands creates habitat for a diverse range of insects, birds, and small mammals.

Dogwoods also play a key role in the calcium cycle of the forest. Calcium is an essential nutrient for both plants and animals. Dogwoods, unlike most other plants, have the ability to absorb calcium from soil and rocks. The trees concentrate the mineral in their leaves and wood. When the leaves fall in autumn, that calcium becomes available to the rest of the plants and animals in the forest.

Grey Dogwood, *Cornus racemosa*

Grey dogwood is a beautiful and versatile small tree that works in many different landscapes. It is found in edge habitats -- meadows, forest margins, roadsides, and clearings. In a home landscape, it can be planted as a single-trunk specimen tree if root suckers are pruned regularly, but it is best planted in a woodland, a hedgerow between properties, or a riparian area.

Grey dogwood sends up root suckers in a radius that increases as the tree matures. If left unpruned (and protected from browsing), the tree will form a thicket that will provide shelter and nesting sites for birds. A single-trunk tree can grow to 30 feet, but it can be pruned shorter. When allowed to form clumps, thickets are usually 15 to 20 feet tall, with root suckers at various heights surrounding the parent tree.

Identification

Leaves are the classic dogwood shape -- oval with a sharp point, smooth edges, and prominent veins. The undersides of leaves are pale green to almost white, possibly giving rise to the tree's common name.

Clusters of tiny white flowers on stiff stems appear at the tips of branches in May. White berries form in late summer and attract songbirds as well as small mammals.



After they berries are gone, the clusters of short, bright red stems remain attractive until spring. In fall, the leaves turn dark reddish-purple. Young stems are reddish, and the bark of mature branches is grey-brown and relatively smooth.

Habitat Value

This plant spreads rapidly by root suckers. It typically grows in moist or rocky ground along streams, ponds, wet meadows, glade and prairie margins, thickets, and rocky bluffs. Grey dogwood is a natural early successional component of many woodland ecosystems. Its ability to send up numerous root shoots and its tolerance of adverse conditions like drought and shade enables it to take advantage of open areas.

Many insects, including bees and butterflies, are attracted to this plant for pollen and nectar. Fruits are a good food source for many songbirds.

Quick Facts -- Grey Dogwood

Size 15-30 feet tall, 10-20 feet wide

Sun Full sun to part shade

Soil Prefers moist soil but tolerates dry, wet, and poor soil

Water Tolerates wet soil and some drought

Habitat Value Good erosion control near water and on slopes; thickets provide shelter and nesting habitat for songbirds; twigs browsed by white-tailed deer

Invasive Species -- Early Summer Tasks

In early summer, invasive species control shifts from targeted removal of spring annuals, flowering biennials, and early-emerging woody plants to more generalized control. If your early spring efforts to identify and remove these invaders were successful, well done! If some of the annuals and biennials escaped removal, now is the time to get rid of them before they set seed, and before emerging natives obscure the interlopers and make them harder to remove.

Impacts to Habitat

What is the impact on habitat of letting these invasives go if you missed removing them early in the season? On one hand, not a lot; a few year-old bush honeysuckles and bittersweet vines don't take up a lot of space, and they can still be removed over the winter when you can get to them more easily.

On the other hand, once these invasives have as little as one year's growth, they've established much larger root systems that disturb more soil when they're removed. Wineberry typically tip-roots to form new plants up to several feet from the parent plant. Multiflora rose and bittersweet can resprout from roots left in the ground after removal of the main plant. Japanese honeysuckle is infamous for covering large areas quickly by forming new plants from adventitious roots that sprout at stem nodes.



Above, nonnative honeysuckle sprouting in a clump of wood sedge and ostrich fern should be removed.

Control

Garlic mustard, bittercress, and other biennials can be cut off below the root crown to minimize soil disturbance. These plants should not be composted because their seeds will continue to develop after the plants have been cut. Below, bittercress starting to flower in a clump of ostrich fern is easy to pull out because the roots are shallow.



Seedlings of woody invasives and vines, such as bush honeysuckle, euonymus, multiflora rose (circled in yellow below), Japanese honeysuckle, wineberry (circled in red below), and oriental bitter-sweet will continue to appear and can be cut below the ground. The problem is that with natives leafing out and growing exuberantly, these seedlings are often missed until they reach a more substantial size and show up above the level of the surrounding plants.



At that point, it's harder to reach in and cut the stem below the ground, but that's still the best way to control these plants. If you wait to cut them until the natives die back in late fall, these plants have developed a stronger root system and are more likely to survive a cutback.

Events and Educational Opportunities

- May 14** [Habitat Advocate: Building Biodiversity in Our Community](#). Lancaster Conservancy, 102 Chester St, Lancaster, PA. 6:00 p.m.
- May 16** [Exploring Life Under Logs](#). Lancaster Conservancy, Graham Nature Preserve, 562 Hillview Rd, York, PA. 9:00 a.m.
- May 16** [Gardening for Ecological Resilience Tour](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE . 10:30 a.m.
- May 17** [Twining Valley Park Native Plant Sale](#). Ambler Keystone Branch, Women’s National Farm & Garden Assoc. 10:00 a.m.
- May 22** [Designing and Planting Native Containers](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE 1:00 p.m.
- May 23** [Knowing Native Plants: Flowering Shrubs](#). Bowmans Hill Wildflower Preserve. Virtual or in-person. 9:30 a.m.
- May 25** [Wildflowers at Welsh Mountain Nature Preserve](#). Lancaster Conservancy, Welsh Mountain Nature Preserve, 835 Gault Rd, New Holland, PA. 9:00 a.m.
- May 27, June 3/10/17/24, July 8** [Native Plants of Summer](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.
- May 30** [Gardening for Ecological Resilience Tour](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 10:30 a.m.
- May 30** [Propagation Workshop: Expand Your Garden with Seeds](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.
- May 30** [Guiding Naturalistic Gardens into Maturity](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE . 1:00 p.m.
- June 6** [Propagation Workshop: Introduce Moss to Your Garden](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.
- June 12** [Designing and Planting Native Containers](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE 1:00 p.m.
- June 6** [Knowing Native Plants: Focus on Ferns](#). Bowmans Hill Wildflower Preserve. Virtual or in-person. 1:00 p.m.
- June 6** [Discovering Native Annuals](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 1:00 p.m.
- June 12** [Native Plant Conference: Cultivating Ecological Stewardship](#). Delaware Valley Univ., 1635 River Rd, New Hope, PA.
- June 13** [Gardening for Ecological Resilience Tour](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE . 10:30 a.m.
- June 13** [Navigating Non-Chemical Restoration](#). Mt Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE 1:00 p.m.
- June 20** [Designed for Nature Garden Tour](#). Bucks County Branch, Women’s National Farm & Garden Assoc. 10:00 a.m.
- June 27** [Invasive Species ID and Management](#). Bowmans Hill Wildflower Preserve. Virtual or in-person.