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Discovering Chestnut Hill: From lawn to meadow – creating your own ecosystem

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by Kevin Hughes

Look around Chestnut Hill and you will undoubtedly notice a common theme: beautiful, architecturally-significant buildings framed by stately, manicured lawns. In fact, it's kind of Chestnut Hill's "thing." But, walk around one of these lawns in the spring and summer and you may notice that aside from an aesthetically-pleasing view, lawns do not really have much ecological value. The tightly trimmed turf is home to very little biological diversity, and is often a non-native species of grass which further limits the number and variety of native species that make it their homes.

Lawns, which today account for an area the size of Texas in the Unites States, have roots (pun

intended) back to 17th and 18th centuries. As a way to mimic the European aristocrats who planted fields around their estates with turf, landowners cultivated their lawns to send a message to their neighbors: they had so much land that they could afford to waste some. But, meadows – defined as uncultivated areas that have more than 50% for cover and feature herbaceous plants and soils that aren't wet year round – can offer a cost-effective, eco-friendly option to the traditional lawn.

A well-planned meadow with a diversity of native grass and forb species provides an important habitat for bugs, birds and other animals. In the spring and summer, a meadow is alive with activity: butterflies, dragonflies and other bugs are busy buzzing around pollinating while birds raise their fledglings in the protection of the tall grasses. Rodents, which are a food source for larger predator birds, also take up residency among the dense vegetation.

In addition to a diverse habitat for wildlife, meadows also provide a wide variety of ecosystem services as well. In a watershed area like the Wissahickon, what you do on your property impacts water quality directly; pesticides, herbicides and pet waste can all end up getting washed into the waterway, polluting the city's drinking water and impacting wildlife. Meadows can help mitigate the environmental impact of nearby homes by filtering residential pollutants out of stormwater. The deeper root systems of meadows help reduce major overflow events and erosion during heavy storms – a major issue facing the Wissahickon Watershed.

Not surprisingly, meadows also require less watering than a labor-intensive turf lawn. The EPA estimates that landscape irrigation accounts for a third of all residential water use nationwide, totaling nearly nine billion gallons per day. As much as 50% of this water is wasted due to evaporation or runoff from inefficient watering methods.

Finally, the transition from a lawn to a meadow also makes financial sense. In the United States, lawn care is a \$30 billion-a-year industry; the average American spends 70 hours a year working on their lawn. By converting some or all of their lawn into meadow, a person can save time and money.

There is no arguing the fact that lawns provide ample recreation and aesthetic benefits. But, the recreational and aesthetic benefits do not always outweigh the environmental boons that meadows provide. If the concept of transitioning your turf lawn to an eco-friendly, cost-effective meadow is not appealing, even returning a small portion of your turf lawn to a meadow can make a real difference. Our environment will thank you.

Kevin Hughes is the conservation and easements manager with the Chestnut Hill Conservancy. You can contact him at kevin@chconservancy.org to learn more about how the Conservancy is protecting open space and natural resources and how to transition your lawn to your meadow.

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