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For Public Release

How to Mow and Care for your Newly Seeded Meadow

ArcheWild® is a professional landscape restoration firm operating throughout the Mid-Atlantic. For more than twenty years, we have been designing, building, and managing ecosystems of all kinds, including urban forests and green stormwater infrastructure.

PLEASE READ THIS DOCUMENT

Your active participation in the stewardship of a newly seeded meadow is of paramount importance to its long-term success, and your mental health.

Congratulations on your new meadow! Over the next few years, this space will transform into a thriving, beautiful ecosystem.

However, the first year of a meadow's life is often the most confusing for landowners.

If you are looking at your new meadow and wondering if you are doing things right, you aren't alone. The internet is full of conflicting advice. Many guides insist you must mow your meadow at exactly 8 inches high – a height that is impossible for standard lawn tractors.



Figure 1 - A well-prepared meadow should look like this over the winter, depending on where you are. Mostly dead turf with no green patches in the new meadow areas

Faced with this challenge, many landowners make one of two fatal mistakes

1. **They panic and mow it like a lawn.** They drop the mower deck to 2 inches to make it look neat and kill the weeds. *The reality:* This kills the slow-growing native seedlings and risks ruining the meadow, or
2. **They receive different and conflicting advice from the internet or consultants and are afraid of doing damage, so they stop mowing entirely.** *The reality:* Fast-growing annual weeds take over, block the sun, drop thousands of seeds, and can choke out the native plants.

A Newly Seeded Meadow is in its "Deep Sleep" Phase

During this phase, many seeds remain in a dormant state while slowly imbibing enough moisture to enable them to germinate. For some species, this process of preparing to germinate can take up to three years. Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), for example, if planted in appropriate conditions, can remain virtually invisible for at least three years for it to “pop-up.” It is imperative to prevent weeds from completing their life cycle (i.e., dropping new seeds) because weed seeds could easily outnumber your native meadow seeds 100,000:1, which will ultimately yield a failed meadow. So, keep on mowing! Just keep your mower deck at the highest possible setting.

Afterwards, a Newly Seeded Meadow Enters the “Sleep” Phase

Newly germinated native species are small, smaller than plantains and dandelions, for a year or two. Species known as bi- or tri-annuals exist only as small basal rosettes for up to two years before they grow tall enough for you to see them.

These small seedlings are highly susceptible to being shaded out by weeds, so you need to keep mowing during this “sleep” phase to maintain their access to light. Just keep your mower deck at the highest possible setting.

Your new native plants are spending all their energy building large enough root systems to enable them to grow up and flower, leaving them tiny and vulnerable above ground. To protect them, we need a realistic, step-by-step approach that controls the weeds without requiring specialized farm equipment.

Here is your customized, expert-guided mowing plan for the first 1-3 years of your meadow’s life.

The Meadow Partnership: Your 4-Step Mowing Plan

Growing a meadow is a partnership between you and our ecological team. We will guide you through the process, so you never have to wonder what to do next.

STEP 1: The Mowing Routine (Your job)

You do not need to let the meadow turn into a weed jungle, nor do you need an 8-inch mower or farm tractor. You just need to keep the weeds from shading out the native seedlings.

The Rule: Mow the meadow area roughly once every 2 to 3 weeks using the highest deck setting your mower has.

The Minimum Height: Even if your highest setting is only 3 or 4 inches, use it. Never mow the meadow below 2 inches. (Note: Mowing below 2 inches, even once, will scalp native seedlings and could immediately void any meadow warranty).

The Goal: You are acting as the “grazer” in this ecosystem. By consistently chopping the tops off fast-growing weeds, you prevent them from flowering and dropping seeds, while allowing sunlight to reach the tiny native seedlings resting closer to the soil.



Figure 2 - What a newly seeded meadow looks like in early spring. Lots of little annual weeds pop up. They pose no risk to the future meadow.



Figure 3 - Here is what a newly seeded meadow looks like later in the year if you do not keep mowing. Weeds are popping up to take advantage of the light and crowding out any small native seedlings.

STEP 2: The Monthly Photo Check-In

Because every piece of land is different, we don't want you flying blind.

Take Photos: Once a month, step out into your meadow and take a few clear photos of the ground and the plants growing there.

Send them to Us: Email these photos to your Project Manager. If you forget who your Project Manager is, please send to contact@archewild.com.

Expert Feedback: Our ecologist will identify the native seedlings and the weeds. Based on what they see, they will tell you either to keep up your current mowing routine, or they will adjust your mowing frequency. In some cases, additional weed control might be required.



Figure 4 - This is what we want to see in your photos. Lots of little new meadow seedlings and minimal weeds. It is at this point that you can begin to reduce mowing.

NOTE: Figures 2-6 are of the same meadow system and, combined, they depict the normal development cycle for nearly all meadows. Watch how they change through the years to better understand your role in stewardship, through frequent but “high” mowing.

STEP 3: THE MID-SUMMER PHYSICAL EXAM (EARLY JULY)

Photos are great, but boots on the ground are better.

The Site Visit: By early July, our ecologist will visit your property to physically inspect the meadow.

What We Look For: We will evaluate the germination rates of your native seeds and assess the weed pressure.

Course Correction: During this visit, we will update your mowing instructions for the rest of the summer. If there are aggressive, invasive weeds that mowing alone cannot handle, we will prescribe targeted, supplemental weed control treatments at this time.



Figure 5 - Your meadow designer might have decided to add a marker species to your seed mix, like this Rudbeckia. Its role is simply to discourage you from mowing because it looks like the meadow is growing (but it isn't yet).

NOTE: “Marker” species are used to create the illusion of a successful meadow in case the landowner does not mow, and to help slow down the growth of weeds. These marker species can be mown with a high mower deck; their basal rosettes will continue to help prevent weeds.

STEP 4: Graduation (Stopping the Mowers)

You will not have to mow like this forever. Frequent mowing is strictly for the establishment phase.

The Green Light: Continue mowing exactly as directed by the ecologist until they officially declare that it is time to stop.

The Transition: Once the native plants have established dominance and the annual weed pressure has broken, we will tell you to stop mowing during the growing season.

Long-Term Care: From that point on, your meadow will only require a single "clean-up" mow per year, typically done in late winter or early spring, to clear out dead growth and make way for the new year's blooms.



Figure 6 - Here is the same exact meadow in its third year. Finally, some of the warm season grasses are large enough to bloom, but there are many more species that have not yet grown large enough to flower. It takes about seven years for all species to show.

NOTE: Some species grow and mature faster than other species. A well-balanced meadow designed by an ecologist will include species you might not see for 5 or 6 years. Inexpensive meadows will be dominated by fast growing species but lack biological diversity and integrity.

References

Here is a list of reputable, research-based references and institutional guidelines regarding the establishment and first-year mowing of native meadows and prairies. These sources support the foundational principles of early weed management, frequent first-year mowing, and the "sleep, creep, leap" lifecycle of native plants.

Academic & Institutional References

- **The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation**
 - *Reference:* "Establishing Pollinator Meadows from Seed" & "Managing Habitat for Pollinators."
 - *Relevance:* The Xerces Society is a leading authority on pollinator habitat restoration. Their guidelines emphasize that first and second-year meadows require active management (specifically frequent mowing) to prevent annual weeds from shading out slower-growing native perennials, reinforcing that a "hands-off" approach in years one and two is a recipe for failure.
- **Penn State University Extension**
 - *Reference:* "Planting a Riparian Grass Buffer for Wildlife" (and related meadow establishment guides).
 - *Relevance:* Penn State Extension details the "Sleep, Creep, and Leap" stages of native meadow establishment. Their guidelines explicitly note that in the first year or two, native plants focus energy on root systems and will be overshadowed by weeds, requiring strategic mowing during the summer months to suppress weed canopy.
- **University of Illinois Extension**
 - *Reference:* "Backyard Prairies & Pollinator Meadows Garden Tips."
 - *Relevance:* This document highlights the vulnerability of first-year prairie seedlings, explicitly warning against pulling weeds by hand (which damages fragile native roots) and instead recommending frequent mowing to chop the heads off fast-growing weeds before they can go to seed.
- **University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension**
 - *Reference:* "Planting for Pollinators: Establishing a Wildflower Meadow from Seed."
 - *Relevance:* Discusses the critical nature of the establishment phase. It highlights that young wildflower seedlings stay small and low to the ground in their first year and cannot compete against more vigorous weeds without intervention.

- **The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station**

- *Reference:* "Proper Timing to Mow Native Plant Meadows Can Protect Pollinator Habitat" (Dr. Kimberly A. Stoner).
- *Relevance:* While focusing heavily on mature meadows, this fact sheet explicitly notes the difference in protocol for *newly planted* meadows, confirming that repeated mowing is necessary to favor desired perennial plants over annual weeds during the establishment phase.

- **Prairie Moon Nursery (Ecological Restoration Guidelines)**

- *Reference:* "How to Grow a Prairie from Seed" (First-Year Management).
- *Relevance:* While a commercial nursery, Prairie Moon is widely cited by ecologists and academic institutions as the gold standard for North American native seed restoration. Their standard protocol dictates frequent first-year mowing to keep sunlight reaching the soil level, which serves as the ecological basis for your customized, height-adjusted mowing strategy.

A Final Note on Patience

Your meadow will likely not look like a magazine cover for many years; the seeding of a meadow is the start of a seven-year stewardship process, and your active participation is essential.

All meadows look weedy in the beginning – this is natural and this is normal. DO NOT PANIC!

By following this mowing guideline, keeping your mower deck high, and working with your ecologist, you are setting the stage for a spectacular, low-maintenance ecosystem in the years to come.

Remember that your seed mix contains species that could take up to three years to even germinate! And it takes about seven (7) years for a meadow to reach a reasonably stable state.

Call or write to us at ArcheWild® at any time.

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