

## Native Meadows: Part 2

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In [Part 1](#) of this series, we looked at how to construct a native meadow and provided lists of native plant vendors. When selecting the exact plant species for the new garden, think about factors like slope and drainage, soil moisture, maximum plant height and width, flowering period, and the plant's spreading potential. Virginia is one of the most botanically diverse states in the U.S., so the native plant choices are vast! To get a little taste of the selections, Figure 1 displays some superb choices. Delve deeper into the clumping grasses, which characterize meadows, and consider using Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), purple love grass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), poverty oatgrass (*Danthonia spicata*), and northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*). Native grasses are natural bird feeders. Some butterfly larvae, such as dusted skippers (*Atrytonopsis hianna*) and northern pearly eyes (*Enodia anthedon*), develop on native grasses but not lawns. Terrific broadleaf plants include Maximilian sunflower (*Helianthus maximiliani*), joe-pye weed (*Eutrochium* sp.), wrinkle leaf goldenrod "Fireworks" (*Solidago rugosa*), bluestem goldenrod (*S. caesia*), blue cardinal flower (*Lobelia siphilitica*), common tall meadow-rue (*Thalictrum pubescens*), coreopsis [especially lanceleaf coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*), lobed tickseed (*C. auriculata*), and tall tickseed (*C. tripteris*)], blue false indigo (*Baptisia australis*), clustered mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*), sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*), and three-lobed coneflower (*Rudbeckia triloba*). For more ideas, check out these Green Spring Gardens publications:

- *Native Ornamental Grasses and Sedges For the Washington, D.C. Area* (<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/greenspring/infosheets/native-ornggrass.pdf>)
- *Using Native Plants To Attract Butterflies, Moths, Bees, and Other Pollinators In the Washington, D.C. Area* (<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/greenspring/infosheets/butterfliesandmoths.pdf>)

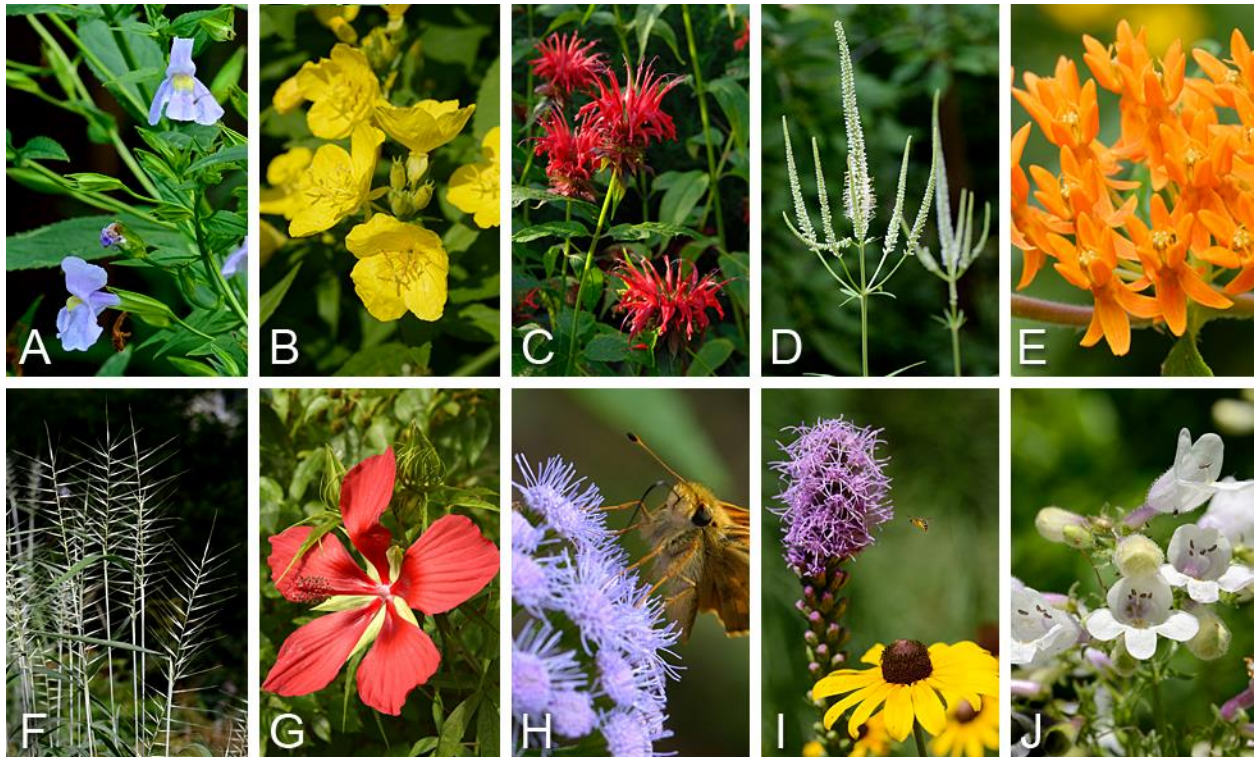


Figure 1. Some ideal Virginia native meadow species include A) Allegheny monkey flower (*Mimulus ringens*), B) sundrops (*Oenothera fruticosa*), C) scarlet beebalm (*Monarda didyma*), D) Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*), E) butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), F) eastern bottlebrush grass (*Elymus hystrix*), G) scarlet hibiscus or scarlet rose mallow (*Hibiscus coccineus*), H) mistflower (*Eupatorium coelestinum*), I) blazing star (*Liatris spicata*) and black-eyed-Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), and J) white beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*). All of these images were photographed in residential Fairfax gardens.

Native meadows are opportunities to nurture plants with declining wild populations, such as the purple milkweed (*Asclepias purpurascens*)—a plant rare throughout Virginia. Folks are more likely to encounter the common milkweed (*A. syriaca*, a good, robust native benefitting wildlife) and dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*, an aggressive native weed that does not support [monarch caterpillars](#)). Habitat loss decimated white turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*). Cultivating turtlehead flowerbeds is a new trend to bolster Baltimore checkerspot (*Euphydryas phaeton*)—a butterfly whose larvae primarily feed on white turtleheads.

Beware of using switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) in a meadow. Even though it is a Virginia native, switchgrass can take over the garden and muscle out desirable species. If you must cultivate switchgrass, think about keeping it within a confined plot or outdoor flowerpots. [Goldenrod](#) and many other aster family members outside of those mentioned here, phloxes, and orange coneflower (*Rudbeckia fulgida*) are also natives but can overrun other species. Vigorous native plants can be mixed together in a separate, “super stout” garden.

Though often hailed as a native, the purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) is not actually from Northern Virginia; the Midwestern states are its stronghold. According to Weakley et al. (2012), the “wild” purple coneflower specimens found in Virginia likely escaped cultivation. The consensus amongst naturalists is that having some purple coneflowers in a non-purist Virginia native garden is acceptable. Avoid selecting non-native species such as cosmos (*Cosmos bipinnatus*, Mexican), common poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*, predominantly European), [crown vetch](#) (*Securigera varia*, also principally European), or Chinese lespedeza (*Lespedeza cuneate*, eastern Asian). When selecting grasses, be sure that they are “native” species and not simply “ornamental.” Garden centers frequently peddle exotic ornamental grasses such as *Miscanthus* sp. and pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*), which come from the Old World and South America respectively and are ecologically worthless to Virginian habitats. Most turf grasses, such as tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*) and *Zoysia* sp., are also foreign species and do not constitute a native meadow even when left uncut. Non-native plants are sometimes sold to “naturalize” an area, which is a nice way of saying, “Invade where it does not belong.” Companies might hawk non-native weeds either as individual catalog items or incorporated into a seed mix.

Plant in layers, with small species like prairie dropseed grass (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) and pussytoes (*Antennaria virginica*) close to the garden paths. Admire tall plants, such as hollow joe-pye weed (*Eutrochium fistulosum*) and New York ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*), from a distance. We will look into native meadow care in [Part 3](#).

Reference:

Weakley, Alan S., J. Christopher Ludwig, and John F. Townsend. 2012. *Flora of Virginia*. BRIT Press, Fort Worth, TX. pp. 1554. [www.floraofvirginia.org](http://www.floraofvirginia.org)

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