

A B-and-B's Experiment with Less Mowing

By Lise Anderson

As many Vermonters become more aware of the climate impacts of traditional grass mowing, we're exploring alternate approaches. Since 2017 at our place — [Cornwall Orchards Bed and Breakfast](#) — we have experimented with changes in mowing, to improve the grounds and also lessen our environmental impact. Here's a quick summary of what we've discovered.

We regularly mow paths and mow around crop trees and gardens. And I semi-annually mow a section of milkweed in late summer for fresh leaves for monarch butterflies.



Our first big change was to try only annual mowing of the meadow. Then, thinking it would bring more wildlife, we shifted to mowing the meadow every two years. This included areas that had been lawn, areas that had been annually mown, and some that had been semi-annually mown before we moved there.

But the two-year "no-mow" experiment was not good for our goals. Areas that were frequently mowed lawn became thick-thatched lumpy areas where the vole population exploded. Areas that were previously annually mowed came to have invasive honeysuckle (hiding but well rooted) to spread and get big — thereby creating shelter for... voles (and others.) It resulted in more work.

On the other hand, we welcomed old-field tree species — sumac, choke and black cherry, gray dog wood, and ash — in certain areas and now don't mow there. I think a subterranean apple tree has come up, too (a seedling or old orchard stump that I am going to try grafting).

This all added to the texture of our meadow view and provided more forage for wildlife. But it means we have to ask, during the annual paid mowing by the guy on the big tractor, "Can you avoid this area, and not mow over there?"

If we were working with just a smallish area mown annually in the fall (after asters bloom) it would work nicely to encourage a diverse meadow. One would still need to hand-extract a few burdock, parsnip, garlic mustard and baby buckthorn.

At our scale of about four acres of meadow, though, it's tougher. Spotting the invaders and hand-extracting them is a bunch of work. And while the honeysuckle gets thwarted, we still have to wrestle a few big ones out every year.

The wrong invasives can get a foothold after two seasons. We have had to learn to tolerate spotted knapweed, but I suffer watching the marauding smooth bed straw prepare to flower.

The result of our efforts? A late summer walk through our fields is now a colorful wonder, invasives and all! We've reduced gasoline consumption, improved soils and sheltered more voles, thereby keeping their predators coming back for more.

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