

# Native Lawns Resource Sheet



## Background

### Problem

Turf grass lawns have benefits like providing space for activities and preventing soil erosion. However, these well-maintained turf lawns can harm local biodiversity and contribute to the climate crisis. Keeping them green year-round requires a lot of water, and the herbicides used for weed control can worsen water quality. These lawns are often required by municipality ordinances to maintain a homogeneous look within neighborhoods. The United States National Science Foundation (USNSF) describes typical American turf grass lawns as "biological deserts," leading to declining biological diversity and negatively impacting local pollinators, soil health, and bird populations due to reduced food resources.

### Solution

Municipalities can consider more sustainable alternatives such as replacing sections of turf with native plant gardens that enhance local biodiversity and reduce water usage, as native plants are adapted to the local climate and require less maintenance. Reducing the use of herbicides and opting for organic lawn care methods can improve water quality by minimizing harmful runoff. Municipalities can also adopt policies to help encourage and support native plant gardens and reduced pesticide use on private property.

## Alternative Landscaping Practices to Turf Grass Lawns

### Native Landscaping

- Native plants are described as those that grew in the area prior to European settlement
- Compared to turf grass, native vegetation requires less irrigation, requires less/no fertilizers or pesticides, and provides food and habitat for birds, pollinators, and other essential wildlife for a healthy ecosystem

### Edible Landscaping

- The practice of incorporating fruit and vegetable producing plants into the landscape in an attractive manner

### Rain Gardens

- Designed to collect and infiltrate stormwater that runs off of roofs, lawns, and pavement
- Prevents the pollution of lakes, streams, and rivers
- Typically consist of shallow depressions planted with native plants that are adapted to moist conditions and that have deep roots and roots systems



# Case Studies

## MINNESOTA



### Introduction

Many municipalities in Minnesota are making changes to their local laws and ordinances by allowing for planting native plants instead of traditional lawns. This switch helps the environment by saving water, boosting local wildlife, and creating low-maintenance gardens that thrive naturally.

### Minnesota Greenstep Cities

The Minnesota GreenStep Cities initiative serves as a voluntary program aimed at supporting municipalities in achieving their sustainability and quality-of-life goals. This initiative is centered around a comprehensive set of 29 best practices, providing leeway for adaptation as per the discretion of city officials, staff, and community stakeholders. The program's objectives span various areas, including but not limited to water conservation, mitigation of stormwater runoff, and the preservation of native habitats.



Prairie perennial garden By:travelgalcindy  
Source: Adobe Stock

### Minneapolis, MN

Minneapolis declared that natural landscapes is beneficial to the city's environment. Under this local law:

- An owner, authorized agent, or authorized occupant of any privately owned lands or premises may be consistent with this subsection and all other applicable laws, rules, and ordinances-install and maintain a managed natural landscape
- Managed natural landscapes may include plants and grasses in excess of 8 inches in height and which have gone to seed but may not include noxious weeds and must be maintained so as to not include unintended vegetation

### Edina, MN - No Mow May

Encourages landowners to not mow their lawns in the month of May.

- Aims to allow flowering plants to grow after winter to provide key nutrients to pollinators
- Protect overwinter habitat for threatened bee populations and other pollinators
- Landowners will not be penalized for not maintaining their turf grass lawns for the month of May

They have also adopted Ordinance No. 2023-07: Vegetation Art. III Landscaping:

- Allows planned landscapes and natural areas to replace turf grass on residential lawns

# Case Studies

## YORK COUNTY, PA MODEL LAW



### Introduction

York County, PA has created a model law for municipalities to implement.

- Outlines the use of meadows to provide ecological services of soil enhancement, erosion control, and habitat for wildlife and pollinators instead of turf grass
- Contains a mix of native grasses and flowering perennials
- Requires fewer soil inputs of fertilizer
- Designed for less maintenance



Wildflowers in a Meadow By: Lawrence Jefferson  
Source: Adobe Stock

### Ferguson, PA

Allows landowners to register their property with the town as maintaining and managing a natural landscape area as part of the landscaping code to prevent fines and citations.

- All plants installed in a meadow shall be native plants. No plants on the DCNR “Invasive Species List” including Watch List species, or the PA Department of Agriculture “Noxious Weeds List,” shall be allowed to grow in the Meadow
- Meadows shall consist of a minimum of 3 grass species and 4 flowering perennial species. Meadows may be installed using seed or plants
- A meadow planting shall have a minimum 4 foot wide mown turf border along any road or property line. A minimum 4 foot height visual barrier may be used in place of the turf border between the meadow and a property line
- The mature height of a meadow must meet all requirements for plant material in a clear sight triangle
- Meadows may not be mown more than twice per year

### Millheim, PA

- The borough’s intention is to encourage landowners to create and sustain a condition of ecological stability
- Places emphasis on the need for landscaping to promote good lawn health, rather than soil impairment and decline
- Prohibits vegetated areas to be unmanaged or overgrown in ways that may adversely affect human health or safety, decrease the value of nearby properties, or pose a threat to agricultural activity
- Allows for alternative groundcover from turf grass, following the other rules of the section. Maintained and not detrimental to health

# Case Studies

## CHICAGO, IL



### Introduction

Established a “Managed Native and Pollinator Garden Registry” on March 8th 2024.

- Created as a response to community push after homeowners were ticketed and fined for having native pollinator garden lawns
- Gives the Department of Streets and Sanitation the authority to promulgate rules regulating standards and processes associated with the establishment and maintenance of the registry of gardens

### Advisory Board

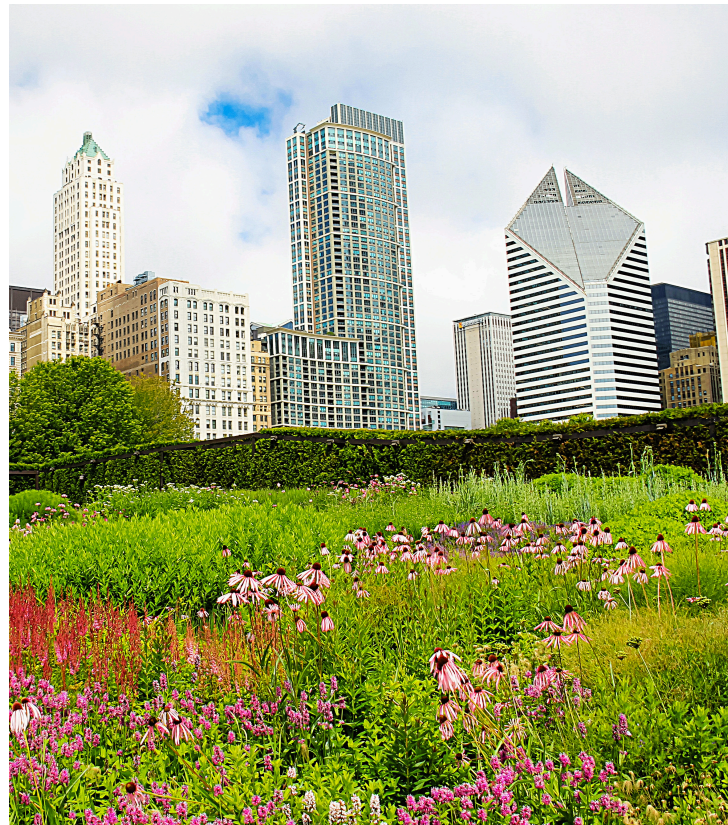
Creates a Native and Pollinator Garden Registry Advisory Board, appointed by the mayor, with the authority to review.

The Board shall be made up of:

1. Department of Streets and Sanitation
2. Department of Planning and Development
3. Chicago Park District
4. City Council
5. An organization representing community gardeners across the City
6. An organization representing urban agriculture growers
7. An organization that supports and owns conservation land in the City
8. A resident who has an expertise in a relevant subject, such as biology, botany, ecology, or horticulture
9. A cultural or scientific institution

### Eligibility

- The managed native and pollinator garden shall be on an occupied property or a community garden
- The managed native pollinator garden shall not have any plants encroaching on the public sidewalk or extend beyond the property line
- Plants in the garden must have been intentionally planted by seed or transplantation, and owners must be able to identify the plants contained within the garden



Wildflowers in Chicago By: Alesia  
Source: Adobe Stock

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