



NATURALIST'S CORNER

No Mow May



As you stroll along any suburban street, you're likely to see rows of lawns neatly manicured by homeowners or professional landscapers. They are trimmed to perfection and maintained with the help of conscientiously applied weed killer. Beneath this picture-perfect aesthetic lies a concerning reality: The alarming decline in flower-rich meadows since the 1930s has contributed to a dramatic loss of habitat for pollinators.

The traditional closely cropped lawn is a relic of the Victorian past, an outdated notion that is not aligned with the urgent need to support biodiversity. Pollinators—including bees, wasps, butterflies, moths and birds—have seen massive population declines in recent decades. Studies show a 95% decline in monarch butterflies since 1950, driven by climate change, habitat destruction, and reduced abundance of milkweed, and exacerbated by pesticide use. A nearly 50% drop in native bee populations has also occurred over this interval. No Mow May is one small way that homeowners can take action to reverse these trends.

What No Mow May Is

The No Mow May campaign began in 2019 in the United Kingdom, led by citizen scientists collaborating with Plantlife, a conservation group. It has since spread to countries around the world, including the U.S., where it has been embraced by many cities, communities, and homeowners. The movement encourages homeowners, who can register their properties, to abstain from mowing their lawns during May. Wildflowers and grasses serve as crucial food sources and shelter for pollinators in the early part of the growing season, when resources are scarce. Left unmowed, grasses grow tall, providing essential breeding spaces for insects, and flowers can set seed, fostering a richer ecosystem for birds and small mammals. Dandelions, often portrayed as undesirable weeds, are the first flowers to emerge and provide the first food for bees. The petals and leaves are also edible for humans, as are several other common “weeds,” such as clover and plantain.

What No Mow May Is Not

The point isn't to skip lawn mowing for a month so you can go fishing or take a nap. Delaying the first mow of a yard that is home to just one species of grass isn't the point, either. As one expert put it: “If your yard is the perfect expanse of uninterrupted grass, then it doesn't matter if you mow in May or not.” The key is to promote a diverse set of native plants that provide pollen and nectar for pollinators.

The Movement Gains Momentum

One of the movement's most famous supporters is Sir David Attenborough, the beloved 98-year-old British biologist and natural historian known for his PlanetEarth series, among many other broadcasts. Sir Attenborough has urged people to delay mowing until mid-July, citing the importance of allowing native plants and insects to thrive. In a recent interview, he remarked: “If it wasn't for the natural world, the atmosphere would be depleted of oxygen tomorrow and we would suffocate. But with nature-friendly farming, meadows can be restored to provide a haven for wildlife. It's all about the timing. Delaying mowing until mid-July allows birds and insects to complete their breeding and flowers to set their seed.”

The Importance of Pollinators

Pollinators are essential for the health and abundance of ecosystems and agriculture. Three-quarters of the world's flowering plants depend on them, as do one-third of the species we use as food. In New England, pollinator-dependent agricultural species include apples, plums, pears, asparagus, beans, onions, pumpkins, sunflowers, and berries of all kinds. Though onions can self-pollinate, they are stronger and grow more abundantly when cross-pollinated by insects. Among the world's pollinators are 3500 species of bees (honeybees, 20 varieties of bumblebees, and solitary bees), beetles, butterflies and moths, wasps (important despite their bad reputation), flies. Also relevant is the work of the birds, small mammals, and bats that disperse seeds and support soil health. Unfortunately, habitat loss, disease, pesticide use, and climate change continue to diminish populations of all of these creatures. There are simply not enough plants to support them.

continued on page 3

Who Is Participating?

Across the U.S., No Mow May has gained traction in many towns, particularly in the Northeast. Several communities in Western Massachusetts and Connecticut have embraced it, with initiatives like the Simsbury Connecticut Pollinator Pathway encouraging homeowners to participate. Roseville, Minnesota engages in “Less Mow May” or “Slow-Mow Summer”, encouraging homeowners to maintain lawn height of at least 3 1/2 inches, limiting demand for water and for lawnmower fuel, thus reducing noise and air pollution.

Why Participate in No Mow May?

The reasons for participating in No Mow May are many. Most importantly, the movement supports pollinators by providing essential food and a safe habitat. It preserves biodiversity and encourages a healthier ecosystem. In turn, meadows rich with insects attract returning migratory songbirds. No Mow May also has the added benefit of reducing lawn maintenance, saving property owners’ time, energy and money. Lastly, it brings beauty to the neighborhood as native flowers and grasses create a natural, vibrant landscape.

The Challenges of No Mow May

Though No Mow May is gaining popularity, not everyone is on board. Several reasons for not participating are worth considering. Harmful plants, insects and other pests can find refuge alongside helpful pollinators. Mold, mildew, and fungus may also become established in areas shaded by tall grasses and shrubs. Then there’s the risk of killing pollinators at the first mow (a reason to extend No Mow into July). Neighbors, passersby, children and pets may be stung by bees—an especially important consideration, given that dangerous allergies to bee stings are becoming more common. Neighbors’ lawn chemicals can easily be brought to your yard by wind or water, harming not only pollinators but you, your children and your pets (Roundup, anyone?). Neighbors may complain that you are too lazy to keep your lawn neat, or complain about the ugly overgrown or messy yard and report your lawn to authorities.

Addressing Legal and Social Barriers

No Mow May raises some legal considerations, so check your local ordinances before you participate. In Springfield, for example, lawns may be no higher than six inches, and the City of Rochester, New York prohibits “noxious weeds and plant growth higher than 10 inches.” Condominiums, subdivisions and similar neighborhoods with Home Owners’ Associations often have their own standards.

How to Participate in No Mow May

Looking for ways to mitigate these concerns? First, check your local regulations. You could also have a friendly chat with your neighbors to let them know your intentions. Maybe they will decide to join you in participating. Perhaps post a yard sign, flag, or banner to inform neighbors and deter complaints. Post them on the edge of your property, with messages like “No Mow Zone,” “Caution - Bees at Work,” “Pollinator Habitat,” “Pollinators Welcome Here,” etc. The key is to make it clear that the non-mowing of your yard is deliberate. Perhaps create a corridor or path of native pollen- and nectar-rich plants for migratory pollinators to travel along, or make a path through your meadow to your door and mailbox. You might line it with stones or bricks, providing additional hideaways for insects. Keeping hedges trimmed will further indicate your intention. If these approaches are not feasible, consider a smaller-scale approach like a “pocket prairie” in a sunny corner, or a circular patch of pollinator-attracting native wildflowers with a neat border.

If possible, plant milkweed, the only plant on which monarch butterflies, designated as a threatened species, deposit their eggs. Poisonous to most predators of monarch butterflies, milkweed provides protection for vulnerable larvae. (If you have farm animals, be sure to keep them separate.) Also consider planting native pollinator-friendly wildflowers such as asters, bee balm, columbine, gentian, dutchman’s breeches, trillium. Some people transform parts of their lawns into an herb or vegetable garden. Consider going a step farther by replacing grass with a beautiful native ground cover. You may also want to encourage others by sharing your experience on social media.

When the time comes to mow, it’s important to be strategic by mowing just a few inches at a time. This will signal to pollinators that it’s time to pack up and move to safer places. A slow pace also reduces the risk that grass will go into shock, a risk when reducing grass height by more than 1/3 at once.

Final Thoughts

No Mow May is more than just skipping a few weeks of mowing—it’s a movement toward restoring lost habitats and supporting the wildlife that keeps our ecosystems functioning. Even the smallest lawn can make a difference. Whether you commit to a month or more, or simply set aside a portion of your yard, every effort helps. So this spring, let your lawn grow wild. The bees, butterflies, moths, beetles and birds will thank you.

~Dori Dittmer