

Mowing Practices Affect Wildflower Establishment

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Last week our family made a trip that had been anticipated and dreaded for weeks. We traveled to the home place to say a final earthly goodbye to my father and to help with funeral arrangements.

The family farm is located in the Northeastern corner of Mississippi, known as the hill country. There is great natural diversity of plant life in the area and I learned a valuable lesson about habitat last week.

True to southern tradition and graciousness, friends and relatives began arriving at the house as soon as news of Dad's death reached the community. Most brought food and visited, providing what comfort that they could. An evening at the funeral home was spent honoring and celebrating his life.

More visits and prepared food items followed the funeral. Though the thoughtfulness was much appreciated, by then I was ready for the great outdoors.

While walking the same pastures that I walked in my youth, I was amazed at how different they appeared. The property was awash in color. Wildflowers were in bloom everywhere.



I saw asters of many colors and sizes. There was a species of milkweed growing and flowering in abundance. I have never recalled seeing it before this year. Hairy vetch was producing its long stalks of lavender flowers. The arrowleaf clover that my Dad seeded by hand years ago is finally producing seed. It's embarrassing to admit, but there were many wildflowers blooming that I couldn't identify.

So, what was so different about this spring? There is a logical explanation, and a principle that I have attempted to teach about wildflowers on many occasions. As always, it is easier to advise someone else or apply information when it's not so close to home.

Those pastures had been either clipped for hay or grazed several times through the spring and summer for the past 40 years. Last year however, because of illness and lack of available time by other family members, the pastures were left with little or no care. This allowed the annual and perennial wildflowers a full season to grow and gather strength without having part of their tops removed by mowing or grazing. No one planned for such a display of color from the wildflowers on the farm this spring, but they are being enjoyed just the

same.

Growing wildflowers requires attempting to duplicate conditions that occurred in Florida before it became so densely populated. Fires, mostly set by lightning strikes, swept through and removed competing brushy plants allowing wildflowers to become established. Several years usually passed between fires allowing these plants to grow, develop and flower.

Obviously, using fire to encourage wildflowers in the landscape is not feasible in most cases. Carefully timed

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mowing can yield the same result. This is done to remove competing young native shrubs, vines and trees, yet allowing enough time between mowings to allow growth and flowering.

That's the scientific explanation for the reason that the farm is so colorful this spring. At another level, I am not so sure. We might not be as smart as we think. Maybe this was my father's way of saying goodbye. After all, his clover is blooming.

Question of the Week: My squash vines grow well early, but the vines begin to die before I harvest many squash. What could be causing this?

Answer: Most likely, this is due to the squash vine borer. The damage is caused by the fat, white larvae of the clear winged vine borer moth. Eggs are deposited on stems near the crown and once hatched the larvae tunnel into the stem. Prevent the damage by applying B. t. on a regular basis. This is a biological control product and is sold under several trade names including Biotrol, Thuricide and Dipel.

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