

The American Meadow Garden

By John Greenlee, Photography by Saxon Holt (Timber Press, 2009)

Review By: Judy Nauseef, APLD & APLD Immediate Past President

The subtitle to *The American Meadow Garden* by John Greenlee, *Creating a Natural Alternative to the Traditional Lawn*, should draw the interest of conscientious landscape designers. We look for ways to replace lawn to create a more diverse landscape using sustainable practices. Many clients still love their lawns, but there are some who are ready for a change. They need enough for the kids to play soccer and catch, but are open to suggestions for the rest. Greenlee's book presents beautiful and practical alternatives to turf grass.

The author defines meadows as "grassy spaces that are not mowed and maintained like conventional lawns." Greenlee is known as an American expert on grasses and as a

result we can trust his recommendations and suggestions for creating meadows, beginning with a palette of grasses to which he adds forbs (wildflowers), paths, seating, steps, water features and even trees and shrubs. My book shelf holds his book, *The Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses*, in which I wrote the date "Feb. 1997," and which I have been referencing for more than a decade. Sources for information on grasses have increased dramatically and Greenlee's new book is another milestone.

After an introduction describing his discovery of natural places and his professional journey, Greenlee includes a section about grasses and where they grow. I found his very short summaries of sections of the United States

unsatisfying and simplistic. If you are looking for information for your part of the country so that your meadows will have a sense of place, you will have to look elsewhere. Better to spend your time with his book reading about solving design problems by incorporating meadows in your landscapes.

Although hardiness zones are included in the plant descriptions toward the end of the book, they are not included in the plant lists, captions or text throughout the earlier chapters. As a Californian, Greenlee has not had to consider cold hardiness in his practice as often as a Midwesterner, and this information would have been helpful. Most of the photographed gardens are in milder zones than the Midwest and Northeast, and although design elements are useful, the plantings are not.

The native prairie preservation and reconstruction movement has helped the growth of the use of native plants and the recognition of the devastating effects of the spread of non-native invasive species. These native plants allow native species of birds and insects to remain viable. There is very little acknowledgement of this history in the book. Whether we incorporate exotics into our meadow designs is a personal decision. However, we need to recognize the great diversity of North American plants and the need to protect their germplasm or genetic resources.

