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Design Steps

Goal Setting

Define your project intentions and priorities. This will guide your decision making throughout the process.

Site Analysis

Take notes or sketch out your site's features, climate, wildlife, and human use patterns.

Site Selection

Choose the best place for your meadow based on your goals and site analysis.

Site Prep

Remove turf and any unwanted vegetation. The more thorough your site prep is, the easier it will be to establish your meadow.

Design

Determine the rough layout and size of your meadow. Consider paths, seating areas, access to water, and ease of management.

Plant Selection

Use your site analysis and goals to guide your plant selection. Research online and look for clues in nature.

Plant Layers

Matrix: This layer weaves the design together and includes grasses and sedges. Try to select at least one warm season grass (actively grows when it's warm) and one cool season grass (active grows when it's cool) to ensure coverage throughout the season. Your matrix layer should be planted on about one foot (or less) centers.

Structural: This layer anchors your design and should be long-lived and present throughout most of the growing season. This layer may include shrubs, trees, boulders, or art.

Seasonal: This layer will change throughout the seasons, and plants may vary in lifespan. It's often planted in masses and drifts for visual impact and showing design intent.

Groundcover: This layer includes low growing plants that spread horizontally. Similar to the matrix, this layer helps weave the design together; however, it's not limited to grasses and sedges.

PROJECT GOALS



Ecological

Ex. attract pollinators, reduce water use, improve soil health, create habitat.

Is there any specific wildlife you'd like to invite?

Aesthetic

How do you want your meadow to look? Do you want more of a naturalistic aesthetic, or do you want it to look more like a traditional garden? Do you prefer simplicity or lots of color?

Functional

What functional goals might your project achieve (ex. create a space, capture runoff, add privacy)?

Time/Budget

Do you value saving time or saving money more?
How much time/week are you able to spend establishing your meadow?

SITE ANALYSIS NOTES



Sun/Shade How does sun move across your site throughout the day? How many hours of sunlight does it get?	
Water/Slope How does water move across your site? How will you irrigate your meadow during establishment?	
Sun/Shade How does sun move across your site throughout the day? How many hours of sunlight does it get?	
Wind Helena's prevailing winds are typically from the west	
Soil Guide to testing soil texture by feel: nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/texture-by-feel.pdf	
Use Patterns How do you currently use/move through the site?	
Wildlife Who currently visits your site? Will you have disturbance from deer or other mammals?	
Other Considerations Adjacent structures? Trees? Views to block? Problem areas?	

PLANT SELECTION

Notes: You don't need to have something flowering in every layer at all times, just make sure that at least one layer has blooms throughout the seasons. Some species might cover multiple layers or seasons. Be sure to use a combination of both short and long lived species. Your structural layer should be relatively long lived, and present throughout most of the year. It can also be a shrub, tree, or other feature.

Matrix	
Warm Season	
Cool Season	

	Spring	Summer	Fall	Winter
Structural				
Masses/Drifts *short lived				
Masses/Drifts *long lived				
Groundcover				

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Books

Prairie Up

by Benjamin Vogt

Planting in a Post-Wild World

by Thomas Rainer and Claudia West

The Gardener's Guide to Prairie Plants

by Neil Diboll & Hillary Cox

Lawns into Meadows

by Owen Wormser

Your Natural Garden

by Kelly D. Norris

The Magic of Montana Native Plants

Sheila Morrison

Manual of Montana Vascular Plants

Peter Lesica

Web

Recommended Species for Native Plants in the Helena Area

MNPS Kelsey Chapter

Montana Native Plant Society

Lots of great resources throughout the website- become a member!

iNaturalist

ID species while contributing to scientific research on biodiversity

Montana Field Guides

Ecological guides by MT Natural Heritage Program and Montana FWP

bplant.org

Ecoregion identification and information

Homegrown National Park

Growing guides and native plant database with keystone species

EDDMapS

Invasive plants lists and reporting