

The Native Plant Gardener Intern Report 2024

Hilltop Hanover Farm

Lily Arbisser Shorr



Summary

My summer and fall at Hilltop Hanover Farm exceeded any expectations I had when I first applied and was accepted to the program. It is rare for me to have a gut reaction, but when I saw the posting for the internship, I felt an immediate “Yes!” and applied the same day.

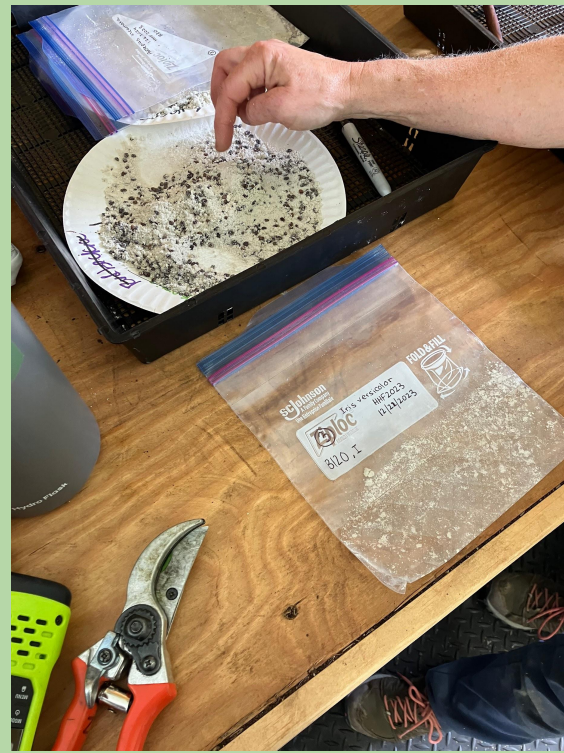
I am grateful for the immersive education I received these past five months and am especially grateful to Emily Rauch, Lindsey Feinberg, and Melissa Hammel for their thoughtful instruction and for encouraging my growth as a budding naturalist with a focus on native plants.

It’s impossible for this report to cover everything I learned, but it can provide highlights. Please also see my “HHF Meadow Installation 2024” report for details on the meadow installation I led in September.

Thank you ConEd for sponsoring this remarkable opportunity.

Seed sowing and potting up

My first few weeks were filled with sowing seeds and potting up seedlings. It was great to see how this is done, and it was even more wonderful to watch the plants grow and care for them throughout the summer.



Planting the herb bed and weeding and pruning the Pollinator Garden

Some of the other projects I participated in early on were weeding and planting out the herb garden beds and cleaning up the existing pollinator garden so the native plants there could shine.



Wild seed collections

It was a great and full summer and fall of going on seed collection trips to various parks (I went to Ward Pound Ridge, Bear Mountain, and Marshlands) with Lindsey Feinberg, our staff botanist. I learned the right time to collect the seed and how to follow the “Seeds of Success” protocol in order to protect our wild populations. I got to watch Lindsey effectively navigate iNaturalist and Avenza to get to existing populations of seed we needed for our collections and which we were planning to grow out in our Founder’s Seed Increase Plots. See pictures on the next page!

Wild seed collections

Off on a
collections
hike!



Learning one of the
keys to identifying
Symphotrichum
patens, by its
involucrar.



Storing some
Carex
vulpinoidea seed
in an envelope
during the
collection.



On one of our outings, we
spotted the S2 ranked plant
Veronicastrum virginicum. It's a
popular native gardening plant,
but has very few wild populations
in Westchester. We don't collect
rare plants for Hilltop, but it's fun
to see it here behind this
gorgeous *Vernonia*
noveboracensis (Ironweed)!

Farm grown seed collections

We also spent a lot of time in the Hilltop production field collecting seed directly from our Seed Increase plots! See the next page for some photographs.



Farm grown seed collections

Collecting seeds from our *Aquilegia canadensis* and *Eragrostis spectabilis* plots



Planting native plant gardens

One of the goals of the internship was to have someone plant out demonstration gardens around the property to show off the native plants grown at Hilltop! I worked on three beds and prepared a fourth bed for planting in the future. In the process, I got to learn about edging garden beds and sheet-mulching (with cardboard and mulch) to prep the area. Here is one bed I planted next to the main office.



When I started



Newly planted



Growing in after its first summer

Planting native plant gardens



After I cleared away the grass and collected rocks



With sheet-mulching completed

I suggested that we put a demonstration garden by the Farm Stand so people can see the native plants right away when they come to shop.



Signage is important!



Planted with a variety of sun-loving and shadier species for the areas under the elderberry

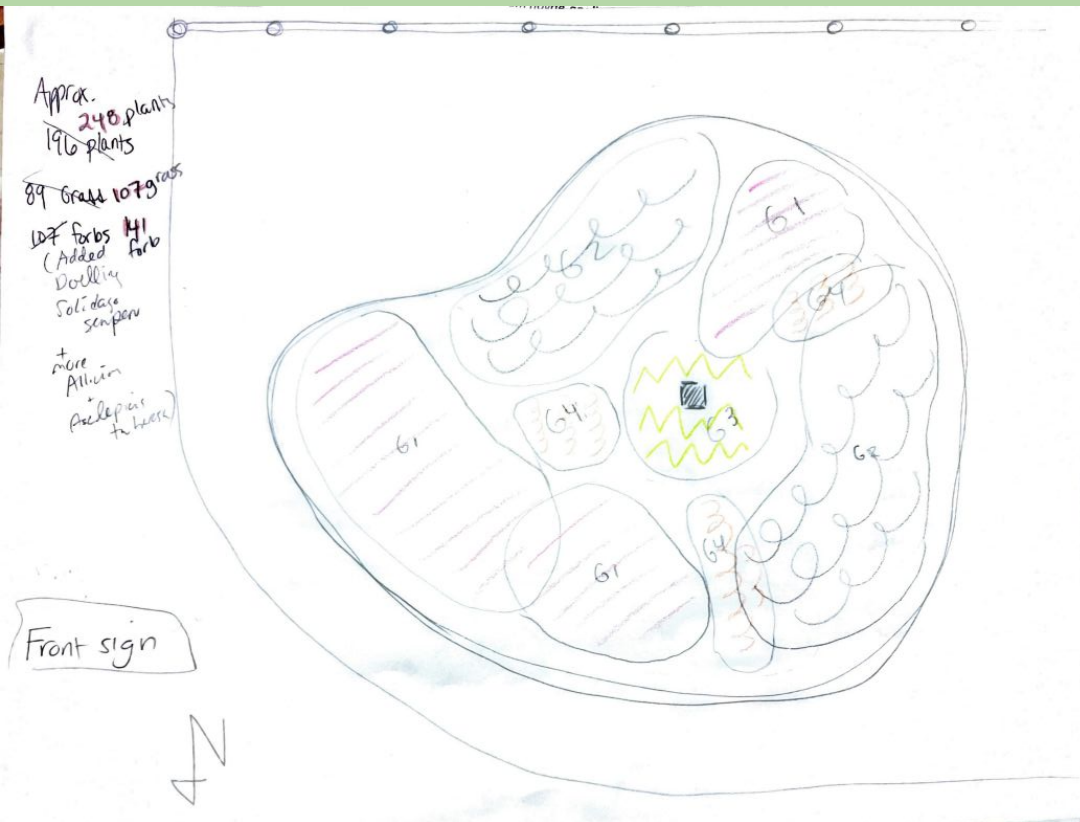
Planting native plant gardens



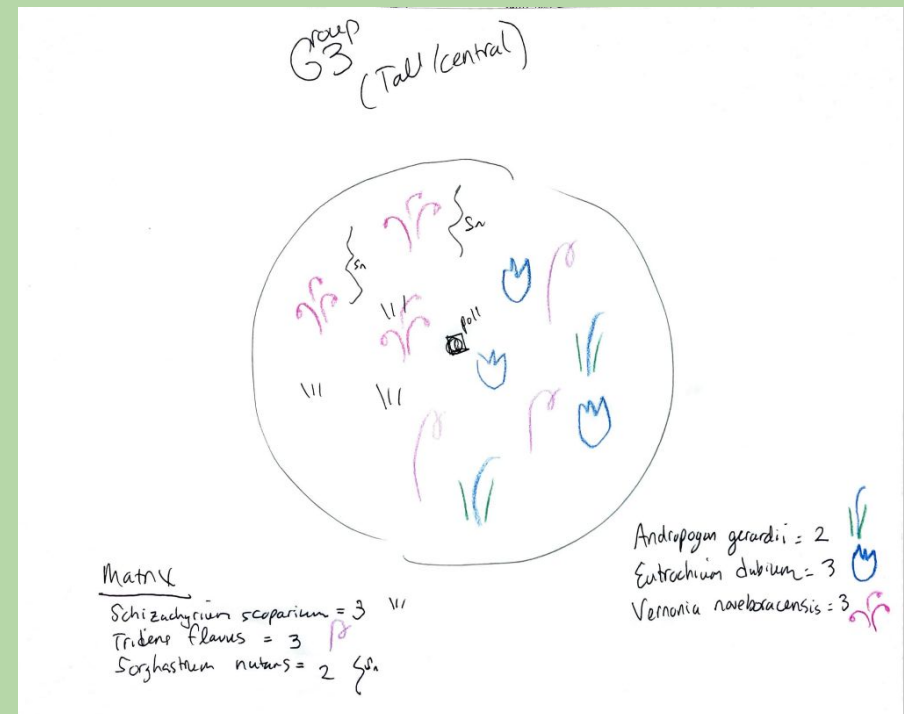
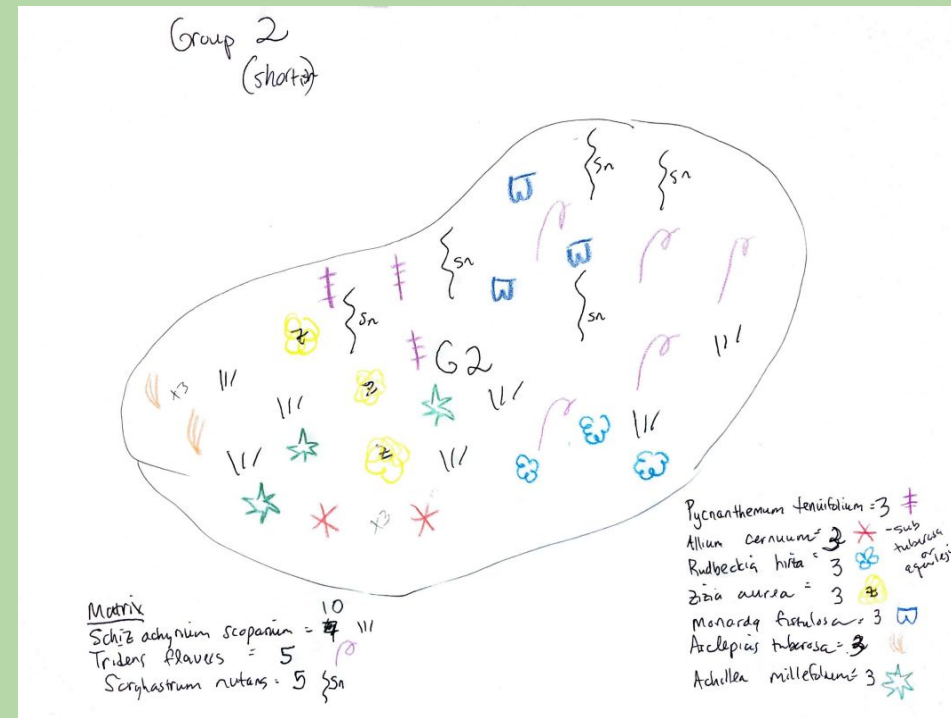
This was one of my largest projects of the summer, designing and planting a garden around the newly placed Hilltop sign. Look to the next page to see the matrix garden design for this area.



Planting native plant gardens



I learned about matrix plantings from books by Piet Oudolf and by Benjamin Vogt. You decide on a species, such as *Schizachyrium scoparium*, which will be the main material or the “matrix” and spread that throughout the garden and then design sections of the planting with various other accent plants and use these groupings iteratively throughout. Above is the main design and to the right are two of the groupings, each using the grasses as the matrix for the planting.



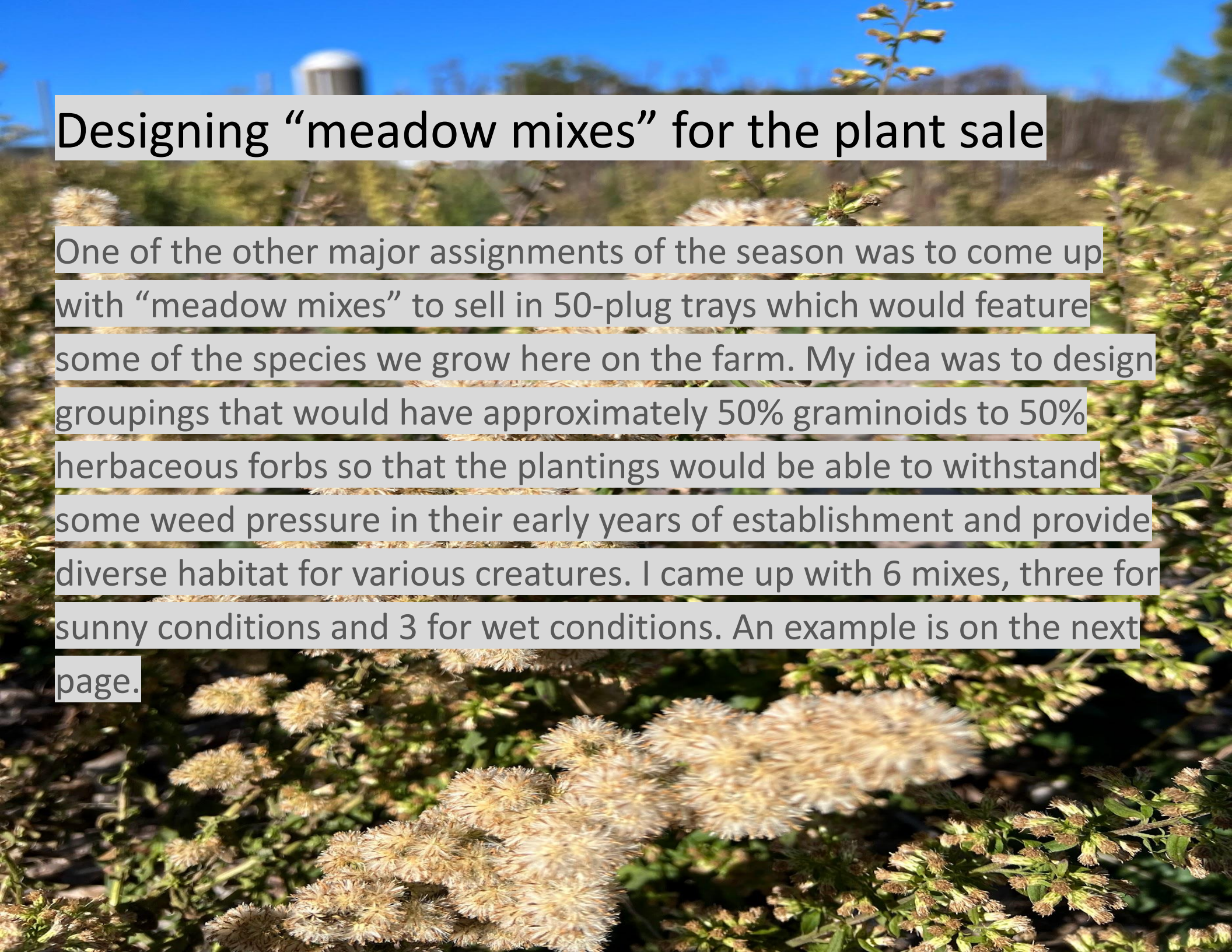
Learning how to use some tools

I was very interested to get exposure to and gain some comfort using various farm and landscaping tools this summer. Amongst them I learned how to use a sod cutter, a power rake, a brush hog, an electric chainsaw, a scythe, an auger attached to a hand drill, the water reel, the sprinklers, and I attended the tractor training.

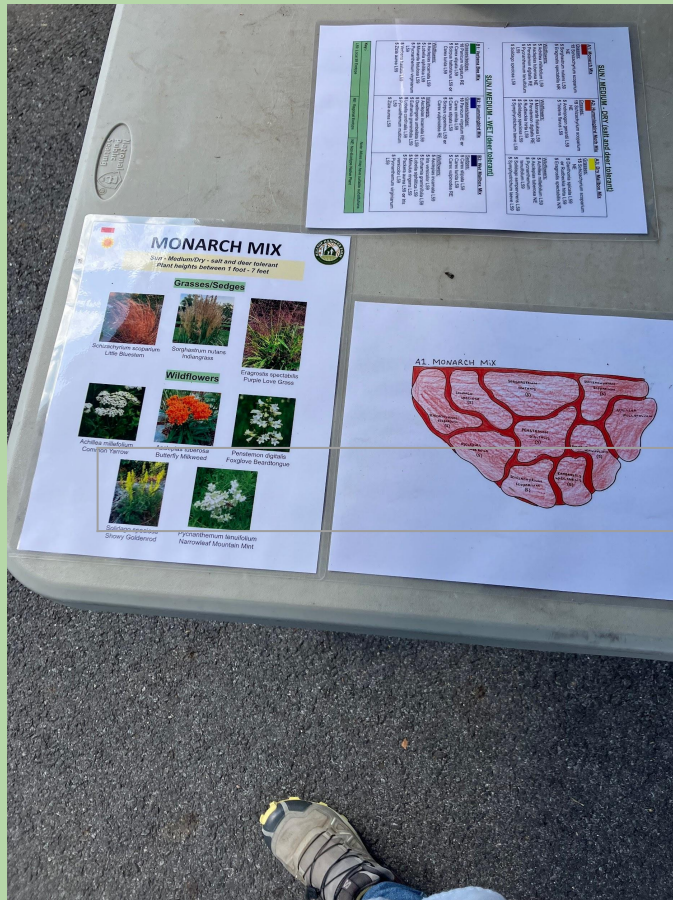


Designing “meadow mixes” for the plant sale

One of the other major assignments of the season was to come up with “meadow mixes” to sell in 50-plug trays which would feature some of the species we grow here on the farm. My idea was to design groupings that would have approximately 50% graminoids to 50% herbaceous forbs so that the plantings would be able to withstand some weed pressure in their early years of establishment and provide diverse habitat for various creatures. I came up with 6 mixes, three for sunny conditions and 3 for wet conditions. An example is on the next page.



Designing “meadow mixes” for the plant sale



A1: Monarch Mix

Grasses:

- 15** *Schizachyrium scoparium* NE
- 5** *Sorghastrum nutans* L59
- 5** *Eragrostis spectabilis* NR

Wildflowers:

- 5** *Achillea millefolium* L59
- 5** *Asclepias tuberosa* NE
- 5** *Penstemon digitalis* RE
- 5** *Pycnanthemum tenuifolium* L59
- 5** *Solidago speciosa* L59



We planted one of the mixes into the garden I planned near the Farm Stand, so that people can see it for years to come.

Planning a seed mix and meadow reconstruction at Hilltop!

Finally, the heart of this internship was designing and directing the installation of a small meadow (3500 square feet). I had the opportunity to learn about how to curate the seed mix, using seed grown at Hilltop in Seed Increase plots and from seed collected in the wild, by permit, by staff botanist, Lindsey Feinberg. This largely local ecotype seed mix was supplemented with purchases from Ernst Conservation Seed and donations from the Greenbelt Native Plant Center. Hilltop aims to provide Westchester County and the Northeast with local ecotypic seed for similar and other restoration efforts to address the Northeast's dearth of ecotypic seed houses. If you're interested in why ecotypic seed is important, read more on our website or read my report "HHF Mini-meadow Installation 2024"!

The team and I selected four methods for converting lawn to meadow that might be doable for residential and smaller commercial projects and which didn't include an herbicide application. Each of these methods is applied to a quadrant of the meadow.

On a personal note, one of the many reasons I applied to be the Native Plant Gardener Intern was because I had been pondering similar restoration efforts at my own house but was feeling indecisive about the seed mix and management plan. I wanted to professionalize my experience and network—and the team at Hilltop is truly incredible—in order to feel more informed about the decisions made on my own property or which I might advise others to make on theirs. Having both a team to speak with and the chance to lead a meadow installation was a dream come true. See pictures of the installation on the next page!

Planning a seed mix and meadow reconstruction at Hilltop!



Other fun moments at Hilltop!

Too many to report, but here are a few snapshots..!



Attending Hortie Hoopla at NYBG!



Learning to make fried squash blossoms during employee appreciation day!



Helping to paint the native plant mural!



Colleagues headed down for a food harvest.

Thank you to Adam Choper (Farm Director), Emily Rauch (Native Plant Program Manager), the Native Plant Team, and everyone at Hilltop Hanover Farm for a fabulous internship experience. And thank you again ConEd for sponsoring this opportunity!

