

**Natural Landscapes: Myths and Facts**

Source: PennState Extension Service

**Myth:** "Meadows and natural landscapes are fire hazards."

**Facts:** This argument is based on the unproven belief that the tall grass and wildflower stems in a meadow are highly flammable. U.S. Forest Service experts state that a grass fire can only sustain high heat for 20 seconds. For a fire to be potentially damaging to a home, it must burn within 4 feet of the home for 7.5 minutes.

**Myth:** "Natural landscapes attract vermin."

**Facts:** The most feared "vermin" are rats and snakes. The vegetation in a natural landscape does not provide the type or quantity of food required to sustain a population of black or Norway rats. These nonnative rats do not eat the seeds of our native grasses and flowers. Rats are more likely attracted to human-produced food (corn, grain, pet foods, food scraps) provided in and near structures like barns or garbage dumps. A neglected lot with human-deposited food litter among the untended growth is indeed a rat magnet, but the managed natural landscape is not.

Snakes may find a hospitable habitat in either a traditional or a naturally landscaped yard if prey species, water sources, sunny areas for basking, and shelter are present. Snakes may find shelter under outbuildings, in rock walls, or in log piles; they are valuable neighbors because they eat true pests, such as mice, harmful insects, and slugs. Only 3 of Pennsylvania's 22 snake species are venomous (northern copperhead, timber rattler, and the endangered eastern massasauga).

**Myth:** "Natural landscapes harbor Lyme-disease ticks."

**Facts:** Deer ticks (*Ixodes dammini*), the primary vectors for Lyme disease, can be found wherever there are suitable hosts. Because a benefit of natural landscaping is that it attracts and provides habitat for wildlife, the landscape may also harbor the ticks associated with that wildlife. As deer ticks move through their life cycle from larva to nymph to adult, their preferred hosts progress in size from white-footed mouse, to small woodland mammals, to white-tailed deer. Adult ticks tend to climb vegetation up to 3 feet high to wait for a large, warm-blooded animal to brush past.

To reduce exposure possibilities, the natural landscape should have setbacks or paths for the human visitor to walk on without brushing against vegetation. The best prevention against Lyme disease is a careful check of body and clothes after being in an area likely to have ticks. More details on Lyme disease are available from your county extension office or health department.

**Myth:** "Natural landscapes are breeding grounds for mosquitoes."

**Facts:** Mosquitoes need standing water to breed. Even the fastest-maturing breeds require standing water for at least 10 consecutive days. A turf lawn, with its shallow root system, is more likely to be unable to soak up all the water from a heavy rain and have long-standing puddles than a natural landscape with its deeper-rooted native plants. Natural landscapes tend to be planned to take full advantage of native plants whose water requirements match the local rainfall and soils. Natural landscapes also improve habitat for mosquito predators, like birds.

Owners of ornamental ponds in either traditional or natural landscapes can take steps to control mosquitoes. They can keep mosquito-eating fish, float Bt "dunks" (floating, slow-release *Bacillis thuringiensis* bacteria, which kill only mosquito larvae and not beneficial and harmless aquatic life), or use pumps and waterfalls to keep the water moving.

**Myth:** "Natural landscapes produce pollen that causes suffering for those with allergies."

**Facts:** Wind-borne pollens are the primary cause of hay fever. Any plant with showy flowers (like the much-maligned goldenrod) is pollinated by insects, not wind. The main hay fever culprit in our area is ragweed, which thrives in disturbed or eroded areas like roadsides. Other major allergenic plants are pigweed, goosefoot (both non-native "weeds"), and the non-native grasses in turf lawns or pastures--Kentucky bluegrass, Bermuda grass, and timothy. Some tree species with wind-borne pollen, such as oak, also are allergenic.

Perennial native plants and native grasses, the primary components of natural landscapes, generally do not produce wind-borne, allergenic pollen. In fact, encouraging these species to grow crowds out weedy pioneer species like ragweed that germinate and thrive at lawn edges.

**Myth:** "Natural landscapes lower property values because they are 'messy' and unattractive."

**Facts:** Real estate with distinctive, well-done natural landscaping actually possesses a marketing edge and has a positive effect on property values. Developers cite the natural landscapes retained in their developments as an asset and charge more for naturally landscaped homes than for homes in areas with traditional landscaping. High-quality natural features like woodland corridors can preserve and strengthen a community's unique characteristics.

Neighborhood organizations, environmental restoration professionals, landscape architects, and nurseries are turning more often to natural landscaping for aesthetic and economic reasons, as well as for environmental benefits like reduced storm water runoff and improved wildlife habitat.

Download entire pdf here: <https://extension.psu.edu/neighborly-natural-landscaping-in-residential-areas> More info at the Village of Yellow Springs Wildlife Habitat Community **ysnwf.com**