

## Field work

Virginia-based J.W. Townsend specializes in wildflower meadows.

**I**N ITS FIRST year of installing wildflower meadows, J.W. Townsend, a Charlottesville, Va.-based landscape company, only did one. But the interest has grown dramatically since that first meadow installation in 1998. In fact, the service has increased by 50 percent each year. This past year alone the company installed 16 meadows.

Ed Yates, the company's nursery manager and wildflower meadow expert, always has been interested in the idea of meadows as an alternative to pastures or lawns. "The most significant benefit of a meadow is what it offers to the local wildlife," says Yates, who majored in wildlife management in college. "Mown grass or pasture land offers very limited possibilities in terms of what creatures can live there. But a meadow supports a tremendous amount of wildlife. In one meadow we installed, a butterfly expert found 500 different species of butterflies."

While the service is only a small portion of the company's \$4.5 million overall revenue—accounting for approximately 3 or 4 percent—it's something that helps set the company apart. J.W. Townsend is one of the only companies in its region that does work like this, Yates says.

Meadow installations also have led to ongoing revenue opportunities via annual or semiannual maintenance services. "Every year we knock back the succession (growth) by cutting or burning the meadow," Yates says. "If you don't knock back the growth, weeds will grow really fast. Weeds don't typically hurt the meadow, but it can really hurt the aesthetic."

### TARGET MARKET

The interest in meadows has grown, Yates says, adding they're not for everyone. "Those who like a manicured lawn are not the right fit for a meadow," he says.

While meadow design and installation began as a primarily residential offering—for large-estate owners and those who didn't want the maintenance involved with a lawn—the service has evolved to include many commercial properties as well. The company has



J.W. Townsend reseeds its clients' ornamental meadows every spring.

installed meadows at several locations for the University of Virginia Real Estate Foundation.

When J.W. Townsend began offering meadow installation, it already owned the majority of the equipment required for the work. The most specific tool needed for meadows, Yates says, is a no-till drill. His meadow installation and maintenance crew also uses a boom sprayer when it's converting a field.

Converting the site may include herbicide applications, Yates says, noting every conversion is unique. It can take up to eight months to prepare a site for seeding. After seeding, depending on the seed mix used, annual wildflowers begin to appear within three to five months. By the second growing season, the meadows appear full but will continue to evolve for years. In terms of seed type, Yates's team custom designs the mix for each meadow, taking into consideration site conditions and the owner's goals.

"Many of the meadows seeded are the sustainable type, focusing upon native warm season grasses and wildflowers," Yates adds. "In general these only need to be seeded once. When a more ornamental meadow is desired we reseed every spring, focusing primarily on annual wildflower species."

Yates acknowledges there's a big learning curve when it comes to meadow installation. It's not an easy service to jump into without having some experience. In former roles, Yates worked for a park authority and was also an arboretum manager. He gained meadow experience in both positions.

"There's a lot of knowledge involved in a service like this," Yates says.

Since the service's inception, he has been passionate about his work on meadows, finding value in the opportunity to create such uncommon landscapes. "Each one is different," Yates says. "We can create an aesthetic that is unrivaled and truly original."

Payton is a freelance writer with eight years of experience writing about the landscape industry.

### SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**COMPANY:** J.W. Townsend

**HEADQUARTERS:** Charlottesville, Va.

**WHY MEADOWS?** Ed Yates, the company's wildflower meadow expert, sees this service as a trend. "There was a time where the idea of converting property into meadowland was thought of as crazy," Yates says. "But now everyone is talking about it and the trend is only going to grow."

**CLIENTELE?** "We've done everything from a 30-acre field to a meadow all around a house," Yates says. "Some residential properties want zero lawn, while others want a meadow as part of their overall property, including a trail. Commercial opportunities have also been increasing."