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In the meadow

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Elegant tarweed (*Madia elegans*) is a self-seeding wetland plant whose oil-rich seeds are a delight to humans and wildlife alike. (Public domain photo)

The “Savannah hypothesis” holds that human evolution started in the woods but moved to meadows and grasslands. It’s been used to explain everything from our stress levels to humans’ love affair with the lawn.

Permaculture values the diverse edges of habitats: where grassland meets forest, for example. In that interzone, flora and fauna from both mingle, enjoying the dynamics of changing exposure to wind, sun and rain.

We may not think of our forested biome as home to meadowlands, but Port Townsend’s Northwest Meadowscapes has built a small seed business around it. I stumbled on them while looking for a more affordable source for yampah, the wild carrot of the Pacific Northwest.

Yampah, *Perideridia gairdneri* or *oregana*, is our own analog of Queen Anne’s Lace, the European *Daucus carota* that has naturalized over much of the United States. I found it at the pricey and perennially sold-out Native Foods Nursery of Oregon.

Both root vegetables are edible. I have tasted wild carrot from near a lake in upstate New York, and though it tasted like a carrot, its flavor was overwhelmingly soapy and bitter. (Now I know I should have nibbled a younger one.) I’m curious to try yampah, which is native to our Western states and is being crowded out of its natural range by human development.

Northwest Meadowscapes carries yampah seed, and this was a gateway to its modest catalog of specialized offerings. Although much of the selection is best planted in fall, now is the time to buy the seed and prepare sites for sowing.

To this end, they recommend covering the area to be sown with black plastic for a full growing season or a full calendar year. Alternatively, smothering with flattened cardboard, which I have advised in the past, can prepare a site. Remember to weigh the cardboard with rocks. Once it dries, it could blow away!

Though most of Northwest Meadowscapes’ seeds are native, some are adventures in adaptive science. Buckwheat, oats and barley can be grown in Western Washington, but only recently was anything like

wheat added to that roster by Washington State University.

Salish Blue Perennial “Wheat” (*Tritipyrum aaseae*), a new grain species, was developed to be a cool-season grain combining the best properties of annuals with their wild relatives. In addition to its food value, this perennial grain prevents erosion, adds organic matter and uses water and nutrients more efficiently than its annual precedents.

Northwest Meadowscares explains that its original plantings of Salish Blue have expanded into beds of fennel and camas, and the whole requires almost no care while producing grain for pancake flour or beermaking without soil disturbance. This has exciting implications if you dream of no-till agriculture, and is worth a try.

I’ll be starting some Salish Blue this spring, but as Northwest Meadowscares recommends, I’ll save the bulk of it for fall planting. Many of their offerings will establish through their first winter and proceed to thrive without added water in various types of soil.

Whether you’re planting them as a complement to, or substitute for, annual cropping, there’s a place for northwestern meadow plants on any broadacre agricultural undertaking. Chances are they’ll establish better with less care, come what may.

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