



Milton Hershey School

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Founded in 1909 by chocolate industrialist Milton S. Hershey and his wife Catherine, the Milton Hershey School (MHS) is a private residential school, located in Hershey, Pa., that provides a home, quality education, food and clothing to students in financial and social need, free-of-cost to the students and their families.

In an effort to provide enhanced wildlife habitat on the MHS' approximately 10,000 acres, installation of warm season grass meadows began in the Spring of 1997 with a fifteen acre plot of indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*) and, predominately, switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*). Since that time, the area covered by meadows has increased to approximately 150 acres.

The meadows have become a major constituent of the campus landscape at MHS. Benefits of the meadow installation include:



Warm season grass meadows are a predominant feature of the campus

- Meadows provide excellent habitat elements for a variety of wildlife species, particularly ground nesting birds (the group of birds that contains the greatest number of species of special concern in Pennsylvania). Uncommon birds that may be sighted in campus meadows are Meadow-larks (see photo on right), Grasshopper Sparrows and Bobolinks.



- Meadows control rainwater run-off. The vertical growth and extensive root systems of the meadows help absorb rain. By keeping run-off in the landscape, rather than shuttling it directly into campus streams, meadows reduce downstream flood potential. At the same time, root systems direct run-off water to underground aquifers. Aquifers store water and slowly release it into the streams. This lessens drought severity by keeping streams flowing.





- Meadows provide a low-cost alternative to mowing grass. Annual maintenance budgets are reduced \$30 less per acre by converting from turfgrass to warm season grass meadows. Generally, established meadow maintenance consists of an annual mowing or prescribed burn (*see photo below*).



Students help perform the prescribed burn under adult supervision

- Most importantly to MHS' mission, the meadows provide excellent teaching tools for academic staff to assist students to achieve scholastic standards.



Students use the meadows and streams as outdoor classrooms

During the years since first installing a meadow on the MHS campus, we have learned the following:

- Lower people's expectations as to how long the meadow will need to "look good." If all goes well in years 3 to 5 a meadow will begin to achieve its objectives. Remember that at 20 to 25 years, a meadow is just beginning to reach its mature state.
- Herbicide need only be used prior to seeding a meadow. Attempts at using selective herbicides and spot treating for specific pest species are generally futile.
- Plant the seed for all the species desired in the meadow at the time of installation. This is a bit more expensive, but worth it as attempts to add wildflowers to established warm season grass stands, in our experience, have met with limited success.



A three-year old meadow

- While a late Winter/early Spring mowing will aid in suppressing invasion by woody species, the use of managed burning takes meadows to a completely different level. Burning during the first five years of establishment quickly discourages competition from annual weeds. Generally speaking, the plants which are desired in a meadow have evolved and adapted to periodic burning, while those species that are considered weeds have not done so, and are therefore eliminated by fire.