

Wildlife Gardening: Wildflowers

In recent years over 95% of our wildflower meadows have disappeared. These meadows provided homes for many colourful wildflowers as well as butterflies, bees, grasshoppers and many other creatures.

Although old meadows can never be recreated, you can develop a colourful wildflower meadow in your own garden. It does not have to occupy the whole garden but could be as little as a narrow strip fringing the lawn.

Getting started

If you want to turn a piece of lawn into a meadow, the simplest way is to give the mower a rest and let your lawn grow during the summer to see what turns up (a good flower identification book will help – this can be borrowed from your local library). You may find that only buttercups and daisies appear, so you may have to introduce some plants yourself. This can be done by “over seeding” but you can also plant wildflowers directly into the lawn.

Which wildflowers should I plant?

Examples of some wildflowers and their requirements:

- Do well on most soils: Ox-eye daisy, Yarrow, Bugle, Selfheal, Goat's beard, Cuckooflower, Yellow rattle, Meadow buttercup, Agrimony, Betony, Perforate St John's wort, Birds-foot trefoil, Devil's bit scabious
- Prefer limey soils: Salad burnet, Meadow cranesbill, Cow slip, Wild carrot
- Prefer well-drained soils: Lady's bedstraw, Field scabious, Black knapweed



When should I sow wildflower seeds?

In the autumn, remove squares of turf and top soil and put them on your compost heap. Then apply two or three types of wildflower seed to the bare earth in winter or spring. Some seeds will need the cold weather to germinate so it is best to check the packet and sowing instructions. Removing a section of turf and sowing seeds into the bare earth works much better than simply scattering seed into your existing lawn as the wildflowers are likely to be out-competed by the grasses.



When should I 'plug plant'?

Wildflowers can be introduced into lawns as pot grown plants. Plant them in small groups, in the autumn, to give the roots a chance to establish. Where possible it is better to use local varieties of plants as these have adapted to local conditions. You can either grow the plants yourself from seed or purchase them from plant nurseries.



Creating a wildflower meadow from scratch

Good ground preparation is essential for success – the secret being soil with low fertility. Fertile soil favours vigorous plants such as dock and coarse grasses, which can take over an area preventing meadow plants from growing. In the autumn, reduce fertility by removing the top 5 to 10cm of soil, then rake the soil to produce a seed bed. Mix wildflower seed with a natural grass mix – a rate of 0.5g of wildflower seed to 1.5g of grass is best. Do not be tempted to sow it too thickly, it will not help. Immediately after sowing, rake the bed lightly and firm with a small roller. Sowing in the autumn allows seeds, which need exposure to the cold of winter, to germinate successfully.

My soil is too fertile for a meadow – what can I do?

You could create a cornfield flower patch instead, using plants such as poppies, cornflowers, corncockles and corn marigolds. These are annual plants, so once they have set seed, cut and remove the vegetation and rake over the soil so that there is open ground for them to grow in the next year.

Aftercare

You will need to look after your meadow to help it establish itself.

- When seeds have germinated and the grasses have reached a height of about 10cm (3 inches), cut the meadow to remove unwanted weeds - also pull up any thistles and docks.
- During the first year, cut the meadow every 6 to 8 weeks.
- Always remove cuttings after mowing so that the soil fertility does not increase.
- After the first year, adopt a twice yearly mowing regime, once in late March to early April and once in late August to early September.

If you would like to **find out more** about how to encourage wildlife into your garden, please see the Wildlife Gardening pages of our website at <http://www.hiwwt.org.uk/wildlife-gardening>.

If you have a question about wildlife you may find in your garden please contact **WildLine**, the Trust's free **wildlife information service** on 01489 774406 or Email: wildline@hiwwt.org.uk