



Advice Sheet

Create a wildflower meadow

Old fashioned meadows full of wildflowers are a valued part of our countryside. They are also one of our fastest disappearing habitats, already we have lost over 95% of them to agricultural intensification. As a result many of our native wildflowers are in decline and some have almost disappeared. Wildflower meadows support birds and small mammals, they are also home to many invertebrates, including butterflies, grasshoppers and bees. Establishing and managing a wildflower meadow in your garden can be a lot of effort, but seeing your own patch in full bloom and alive with insects will make it worthwhile.

Wildflower meadows do best on soils with poor fertility, as on rich soils the courser grasses grow faster and can swamp out the slower-growing wildflowers. Traditionally meadows were used for grazing stock, or were cut for hay each year. Management techniques for garden meadows should mimic these events.

Converting an existing Lawn

Although it is possible to turn an existing lawn into a meadow, if the soil underneath is very fertile the results may not be fully satisfactory. The first step is to reduce the existing fertility, by mowing closely for several seasons and removing all the cuttings. Unless you have been using lawn weedkillers there may already be some wild plants in your lawn. Try leaving a patch unmown for a few weeks and see what comes up. You might find daisy, meadow buttercup, dandelion, cat's ear, black medick, speedwell, plantain or clover.



A flourishing wildflower meadow

Additional wildflowers can be introduced to the meadow in two ways.

Over-seeding

Cut the grass as low as possible, then rake away the debris. This should leave bare patches of soil. Sow your seeds over the bare patches, then rake lightly or sprinkle some dry soil over them. Water lightly. While the wildflowers are establishing themselves mow with the blades on the highest setting, this will prevent the grass swamping out your flowers.



Knapweed (left) and St John's wort



Planting pot grown wildflowers

Grow wildflowers from seed or buy pot grown plants. These can then be planted directly into the lawn. Clearing a small area around the plant will reduce competition while it is establishing itself. If planting is done in September the plants can establish themselves over winter to flower next year. This method works well in a small meadow, and has a much higher chance of success than using seed.

Establishing a meadow from scratch

Preparation of your site is important: it needs to have low soil fertility and to be free from perennial weeds. To reduce fertility strip off the turf or a layer of topsoil from your chosen site. This will also remove some weed seeds. Dig out the roots of perennial weeds such as docks and nettles, then roll the ground to firm it. If time allows, leave for a few weeks to allow weed seeds to germinate, these can then be hoed off.

The best time to sow seed is March to April or August to September. You can buy flower and grass seed mixes to suit a variety of soil types. Try to avoid very vigorous grasses such as rye-grass, as these will quickly out compete the slower growing wild flowers. Fine grasses such as bents and fescues are more suitable.

Where possible, stick to wild flower species found in your area. Seeds should always be from local sources, avoid imported wild flower seeds as these may be genetically different from the native flowers, and are unlikely to thrive in our climate.

Some seeds are very fine, so it can be helpful to mix the seed with damp sand to help spread it more evenly. In dry weather water the seeds in with a fine spray.

Once the seeds have germinated mow every 6-8 weeks with the mower blades on the highest setting; this promotes root growth and prevents the grasses becoming dominant over the wildflowers. In the second year establish a mowing regime appropriate to the flowering time of the meadow.



Purple loosestrife does best in damp, even waterlogged, soil.

Mowing regimes

Meadows are usually managed in one of two ways, depending on when most of the plants flower. Spring flowering meadows are not mowed until after midsummer, then kept short into the autumn. Summer flowering meadows are mowed in the spring up until about June, then left to flower until late autumn.

In both cases mowing is resumed once most of the seed is ripe. Leaving the hay on the ground for a few days helps shed the seed back into the meadow (alternatively, the hay can be used as a seed source for a new meadow elsewhere). After this the hay should be removed, to help lower soil fertility.



Red campion will flourish in a shady spot



Other ways to use wild flowers

In a small garden or on very fertile soil a wildflower meadow may not be practical. But there are other ways to bring wildflowers into your garden

Enrich part of a lawn with spring flowering bulbs. Plant wild daffodils, snowdrops and bluebells, or even fritillary and spring squill. Bulbs should be planted at a depth 3 or 4 times their height. Random drifts will look most effective. In spring do not mow until most of the foliage has died back, about two months after flowering, as the leaves are needed to nourish the bulbs for next year. After this mow as normal. Early flowering wildflowers such as primroses are worth trying alongside the bulbs, plant out pot-grown plants into the lawn in autumn.



Cowslip

Grow some native wildflowers in among the flower borders. Primrose, ox-eye daisy, fox-glove and meadow cranesbill are all showy enough to earn a place in a decorative border. Annuals such as cornflower and field poppy are also worth sowing. For a perennial border you can also try lily-of-the-valley, cowslip, bugle, red campion, musk mallow, greater knapweed.



Betony

Sow an annual cornfield seed mix on a patch of bare ground. These flowers were once weeds of arable crops, and it is possible to buy mixes with name such as "Farmers Nightmare". These colourful annuals include poppy, corn marigold, corn-cockle, scarlet pimpernel, chamomile and cornflower. All are happy to grow in fertile soils. The ground should be cultivated each year, to encourage germination and prevent perennials from establishing themselves. If you leave cultivation until the winter, after the plants have set seed, your cornflower patch should blossom year after year.



Field scabious

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