

WILDFLOWER MEADOWS



A wildflower meadow is an area of grass where wildflowers grow. Wildflower meadows naturally grow best in soil that has low fertility and low nutrients such as sandy soil or chalk cliffs - ideally with only around 1.5 cm of topsoil. Vigorous grasses cannot easily grow in such poor conditions and so do not out-compete the wildflower. The variety of wildflowers in the UK countryside has drastically decreased since the 1930s mainly due to more intensive agricultural practises and the loss of over 99% of 'unimproved grasslands' due to development or land use change. The Royal Parks charity is increasing the area of wildflower meadows in our parks and relaxing our mowing regimes to help wildflowers to establish. You can help at home by setting aside anything from a small windowbox to your entire lawn for growing wildflowers -and enjoy a beautiful burst of wildflower colour around your home.

One of the wonderful things about wildflower meadows is that they are great for lazy gardeners – you don't have to do much to create a burst of blooms. A tightly-mowed lawn rarely flowers, but long grasses produce beautiful ethereal flower-heads that provide food for invertebrates. Instead of mowing your lawn every week, sweating to achieve pristine green golf-course style grass, you could be relaxing in the sun with your feet up, amongst a colourful scented haven of flowers and beautiful pollinating insects.

Why are wildflower meadows good for invertebrates?

The loss of wildflower meadows caused a decrease in a huge array of invertebrates including bees, butterflies, beetles, millipedes and spiders who live in or feed on wildflower meadows. As invertebrates decline, so do the birds, bats and reptiles who eat them.

Pollinating insects drink from nectar-rich plants and often very specific ones at that. For example, the wide-spread gatekeeper butterfly loves wild marjoram, whilst the rare marbled white butterfly is partial to the flowers of sheep's fescue grass. Invertebrates also lay their eggs on specific plants, for example the common blue butterfly lays its eggs on bird's foot trefoil. Tall vegetation also provides shelter for invertebrates like spiders, ladybirds and lacewings who help to control pest-insects. The meadow brown and small skipper butterflies are at home amongst long grasses in a meadow.

GROWING YOUR OWN WILDFLOWER MEADOW

The wow-factor and wildlife-factor of your wildflower meadow will depend on the level of effort you want to put in – but there are many options, all of which will encourage pollinators and other invertebrates into your garden. To get started, choose the area where you'd like your wildflower meadow to grow; a large open sunny spot is best, either flat or sloping. You could dedicate your whole lawn, just the back section, an outer border or a particular bed.

If you are converting an existing bed with richer soil, your best bet is to plant an annual flower meadow using cornfield flowers, such as poppies, cornflowers and corncockle.

If you want to convert a fertile bed to a wildflower meadow, you'll need to reduce the soil fertility by removing the top 7-15 cm of topsoil with a turf cutter or spade. If that sounds like too much effort, you could sow a crop of mustard plants in the first year instead which remove nutrients from the soil as they grow. When creating a meadow from a lawn, relax your mowing regime to just two times per year; once in the spring and once in the autumn (a two-cut approach). Below are some specific approaches you can try from the easy to the energetic.

THE LAZY LAWN APPROACH

EFFORT



REWARD



COST £0

Step away from the fertiliser and put down the lawn mower! If you don't want to commit to a full-bloom wildflower meadow, why not just ease off with the mowing and weeding instead? #SayNoMow. If you leave a section of your lawn (or your whole lawn!) to allow weeds (aka wildflowers! – mind blown) to pop up naturally, this will benefit invertebrates by providing an increase in nectar, pollen, and habitat complexity. Leave as long as you can stand between mowings to allow dandelions, daisies or clovers to pop up. A weed by any other name would smell as sweet to the bees.

THE NATURAL APPROACH

EFFORT



REWARD



COST £

If you want minimum effort and maximum nature, the two-cut and rake approach is all you need to do. Once you stop cutting your lawn, before long wind-borne wildflower seeds will settle and pop up in your meadow such as rough hawkbit, yarrow and selfheal. What you see appearing will of course depend on what else is flowering nearby. However, if you aren't preparing your soil or doing any planting, you may see a dominance of 'weed' species like nettles, thistles, dock or hogweed. You can either pull these up by hand to give other wildflowers a chance or go for the rustic look and leave them for invertebrates to enjoy! Nettles are a food plant for small tortoiseshell and peacock butterfly caterpillars and ladybirds eat aphids that use them for shelter. Painted lady butterflies love thistles and the very rare fiery clearwing moth lives in the roots of curled dock. Beauty is in the eye of the bee-holder after all!

THE SEED APPROACH

COST ££

EFFORT



REWARD



Sowing seeds will sprinkle some more magic across your wildflower meadow and allow you to choose the plants that will grow. Use a seed mix which is appropriate for your soil type, and always choose UK native species from UK suppliers. When converting a nutrient-rich bed or border, it also helps to lay a few centimetres of rocky substrate such as sand or chalk to reduce soil fertility. In Autumn, sprinkle seed on the surface at a rate of 2g per m² and gently walk once over the soil to tread the seeds in very slightly. Water a little or a lot depending on how much rain there has been, and wait patiently to see your flowers grow and bloom!

THE PLUG APPROACH

COST £££

EFFORT



REWARD



To give your meadow an extra boost, plant wildflower 'plugs' (small-sized seedlings grown in trays) when you are starting off or after the spring or autumn cut. You can either use seeds to grow plug plants yourself in pots or a small nursery bed, or buy plugs in the spring from garden centres in person or by post. After you've cut the grass, remove divots of turf with a bulb planter, half-fill with seed compost, plant three plugs together and water. This will give your wildflowers a head start and ensure your wildflower meadow has that extra va va voom.

THE TURF APPROACH

EFFORT



REWARD



COST

££££

If you'd like to go all in and start things off with a ready-made colourful bang rather than a slow and steady natural progression, you can lay wildflower turf. The Royal Parks have used this approach in St James's Park – search online for wildflower turf and you'll see a range of companies that supply it. There are different turf mixes available according to what you'd like to attract, how you'd like your meadow to look and what conditions are like in your garden. To lay turf, clear the desired area of all plants and large stones, dig at least 15 cm of soil out across the entire area and ideally add 10 cm of low fertility top soil. On a dry day, rake the soil into a fine tilth (the consistency of the crumble on an apple crumble!), roll out your turf, water and voila! A ready-to-go wildflower meadow that just needs some loving watering to get flowering.

BALCONIES AND WINDOWSILLS

MEADOW-IN-A-POT

EFFORT



REWARD



COST ££

If you don't have much outside space, you can grow wildflowers in pots on a window sill or balcony.

Fill the bottom of a well-draining pot with rocks and layer low-nutrient top soil such as a soil and sand mix on top (don't use compost). Use either the seed-sowing or plug approaches described below, but stick to a mix of only 4-5 species. Watch your balcony or window sill brighten up and admire your invertebrate visitors from the comfort of your home.



Choosing your wildflower species

Your soil type will determine which species will thrive in your wildflower meadow. Find out more about what kind of soil you have and use that as a starting point to decide on what species you want to plant. Some of the best species are:

Birds-foot trefoil, common sorrel, cowslip, field scabious, hoary plantain, greater and common knapweed, lady's bedstraw, meadow buttercup, ox-eye daisy, red clover, ribwort plantain, wild carrot, yarrow, plus a range of wild (not lawn) grasses, such as crested dogtail, cocksfoot or sweet vernal.

How do I maintain my meadow?

After mowing, rake away the cut grass (known as 'arisings') to help keep the soil nutrient poor and low fertility. Leaving the grass cuttings where they are to decompose will only add more nutrients when they rot.

Stick with the two-cut approach to mowing once in the spring and once in the autumn, ideally when the flowers have already gone to seed so that you get even more flowers for next year. Get to know what flowers you have and when they flower to help plan the best time to cut. You can either use a scythe, garden shears, strimmer or lawn mower. This will depend on what type of plants are growing, so check out what's growing first and follow the user instructions and safety advice for your tools. Using a scythe is the most traditional and gentle method to look after your wildflower meadow.

Remember to rake off all the arisings after the cut, and either throw them away or use them to create a dead-hedge habitat pile. To keep dominant species like grass and nettles at bay, you can introduce species such as yellow rattle as seeds or plugs. That's it!