

Encouraging Wildflowers

This is not a comprehensive guide but offers some basic guidelines and resources to get you started.

Mow Less & Mow Higher

One of the easiest and simplest ways of making your garden more insect and wildlife friendly is to simply not mow, mow less and/or raise the height of the cutting blade. Some benefits are:

- Less petrol/electricity use.
- Less time spent behind a mower (and the noise that ensues).
- Longer grass is more resistant to drought, and therefore saves water.
- Naturally-occurring herbaceous and annual plants and flowers may be biding their time, waiting for a chance to emerge.
- Soil insects are an important part of the food chain and by not applying fertilisers and pesticides you'll save money and build the food chain (starlings love leatherjackets and if the leatherjackets manage to turn into crane flies, bats and moths love to eat those).

If you can't bear to leave all of your lawn uncut, there are a couple of alternatives to consider:



Try **mowing paths** through the lawn and leave the rest of the grass to grow. This is something we did in the 'orchard' area when we lived at Bovey Cottage. The grandchildren loved racing along the paths and enjoyed being in an environment where the grasses were taller than them.

On moonlit nights, the long grass turned silver and shimmered - totally gorgeous. And, the area was much more alive with insects and birds.

Leave 1 square metre; having a wild area surrounded by a mown area looks great, so if one square metre is all you can spare/bear, that's a start. Simply stop cutting that one square metre apart from a cut in late summer. Do remove all the clippings as you don't want the clippings to fertilise the area: the less fertile this patch gets, the more chance the wildflowers will have.

The growth will soon shoot up and herbaceous plants will soon become obvious as they flower and set seed in the summer. If they don't, then buy a few seeds (or beg some), scrape the grass away in some areas to leave loose, bare soil and sow some seed. You could also consider buying some wildflower plugs.

The Wildflower Meadow



James and I are often asked how we established the wildflower meadow at the barn. Quite simply, we were lucky. The ground hadn't been farmed or fertilised for years and years and when we laid the geo-thermal pipes, got churned up, rendering the grass to bare soil. This meant we had infertile, bare ground on which to scatter seed. In retrospect, we would have chosen a seed mixture with fewer grass species (live and learn!) but the wildflowers persist well and at the last count, we have over 35 different species.

Our meadow is predominantly made up of perennial wildflowers as with annuals, the soil has to be harrowed/turned over in some way to allow the annuals to grow. This isn't something we want to do as we don't wish to release carbon from the soil, or use heavy machinery on the site.

We've added extra seed over the years and I've heard people ask why the Oxeye Daisy is so prolific. Quite simply, it's a 'pioneer species', taking hold as the dominant flower for the first three to four years. In time though, the other perennials get a grip and the Oxeye reduce in number - but having a field of Oxeye Daisies is no bad thing to look at for a while.



Our last project involved creating raised mounds, which makes the field look more interesting in winter. In winter 2020, we also planted new hedgerow stock on some of the mounds nearest the fence to create a better wildlife corridor from one end of the field to the other.

If you really wish to get serious about creating a wildflower meadow (no matter how small), here are a few things to consider and more resources with in-depth information are easily available.

Get rid of the grass/topsoil

Do this by using a spade, making sure you go down deep enough to lift up the grass, roots and all - about 5cm deep. If you're being ambitious and going large, hire in the right equipment to undertake a scrape.

Remove the Competition

Leave the area for three to four weeks to see what comes up; a session or two of weeding will almost certainly be needed.

Assess your soil type

The seed mix you need will be determined by your soil type; sand, clay, chalk or some kind of combination. The best way to tell what type of soil you have is by touching it and rolling it in your hands:

- **Clay soils:** are heavy, tend to hold nutrients well, are wet and cold in winter and baked dry in summer - our field often has great cracks in it after long, dry spells. Clay soil has a smearing quality and is sticky when wet. It's easily rolled into a long thin sausage and can be smoothed to a shiny finish by rubbing with a finger. If it's not a heavy clay it won't get quite as shiny and be as easy to make a sausage
- **Sandy soils:** are light, dry, warm and low in nutrients as the nutrients drain away easily. Sandy soil has a gritty element – you can feel sand grains within it, and it falls through your fingers. It cannot be rolled to make a sausage shape. If it isn't a coarse sand and perhaps a sandy loam, it may stick together better.
- **Silt soils:** are fertile, light but moisture-retentive, and easily compacted. Pure silt soils are rare, especially in gardens. They have a slightly soapy, slippery texture, and do not clump easily.
- **Loams** are mixtures of clay, sand and silt that avoid the extremes of each type.
- **Chalky soils** are very alkaline and may be light or heavy, with the chalk element sometimes often sitting only 6" below the top level of soil. If soil froths when placed in a jar of vinegar, then it contains free calcium carbonate (chalk) or limestone and is lime rich.

Calculate/measure the area to be sown

Don't guess, get a tape measure out to calculate the square footage/ meterage as this way, you won't waste money buying more seed than you need.

Level/cover the scraped area

It can be a good idea to re-establish a level playing field by topping off the scraped area. What you use will depend on your soil type but under no circumstances use good topsoil, compost or any organic matter.

Wildflowers do best on 'unfertile' soil whereas grass (and many weeds such as nettle, dock and thistles) - which you'll be wanting to minimise - do best on more fertile soil. Calculate how much sand or sand + poor-quality (top) soil you'll need to level off the area. On heavy clay, use a greater proportion of sand to soil - even add some grit. On sand, use less sand and more soil. Try and source the soil you use from somewhere in your garden but again, make sure it's not enriched in any way.

The Seed

Ideally, choose native wildflowers. 'Pictorial Meadows' (such as seen at the Olympic Park) are an invention by ecologist Nigel Dunnett and although popular, are not true wildflower meadows. This is because they usually contain a proportion of non-native wildflowers and often contain a high proportion of annuals, which means the soil must be turned in order for the seed to sprout and flower. A true British wildflower meadow contains only native species and will support native insects, butterflies, crickets (we have loads of crickets) and birds/skylarks. Leave the 'exotics' for your borders so they can service the pollinators from there.

Choose seed that's best for your soil type and buy a little over what's recommended for the area you're sowing. Most of the websites will offer guidance as to how much seed you'll need; 1 to 2 teaspoons (5 to 10g) maximum per square metre is generally plenty.

By all means include some annuals so you get a bit of colour in the first year, but I'd personally recommend a predominantly perennial seed mix to ensure you don't have to turn the ground over every year. Try and buy from a reputable site supplying organic native seeds. Most suppliers enable you to buy specific species which you can then mix together. If you really want wildflowers, don't include any grass seed in your mix.

- Naturescape: www.naturescape.co.uk
- British Wildflower Plants: www.wildflowers.co.uk
- John Chambers Wildflower Seeds; sold through the Plantlife shop, www.plantlife.org.uk

I get questions about Yellow Rattle, a semi-parasitic plant that feeds off grasses. If you don't have any grass in your seed mix, including yellow rattle is pointless as it has nothing to feed on. However, if you're simply allowing an area of lawn to go wild, scraping away some of the grass to loose, bare soil and sowing some yellow rattle seed may prove helpful. Yellow rattle needs cold conditions to germinate properly so mix the seed with some sand and sow it in cold conditions. Pam Lewis recommends a good source for fresh yellow rattle seed: stickywicket.garden@virgin.net (01300 345476).

Sowing the Seed

Make sure the soil you're going to be sowing on is loosened up a little - avoid sowing on compacted soil or when it's water-logged or dust dry. Sowing towards the end of August is probably the best time, but a mid-Spring sowing can also yield decent results.

Avoid simply throwing seed on the soil; mix it with damp'ish sand or a sand and sawdust mix. Using sand/sawdust helps with even distribution and ensures over-seeding. Dampening the sand/sawdust provides a small amount of water to help with germination, and it stops the mix from being blown away. Pam Lewis recommends 10g of seed to 10L of sand/sawdust, but if you've got a large area to sow, you may need to reduce the amount of sand/sawdust!

Do be aware that if the weather is very dry, it'll take longer for your seeds to germinate. Equally, we sowed one year (rather late) and immediately after sowing it started raining... and didn't stop. Much of the seed drowned or rotted and we had to try again.

Keeping out Invasive Weeds

Sooner or later, invasive 'weeds' will appear such as creeping buttercup, sow thistle and dock (and we also get self-seeded rape from time to time). Don't treat them with weedkiller please - dig them up after a rainy spell before they have a chance to set seed. It's a bit of a chore but in time, you'll need to do this less and less.

Topping Up

No sowing procedure is accurate in terms of precisely how much seed goes where. Plus, a decent meadow takes a year or two to establish so don't be disappointed if it doesn't look stunning in year one. Look out for bare patches though; loosen up the soil in those areas and sow more seed.

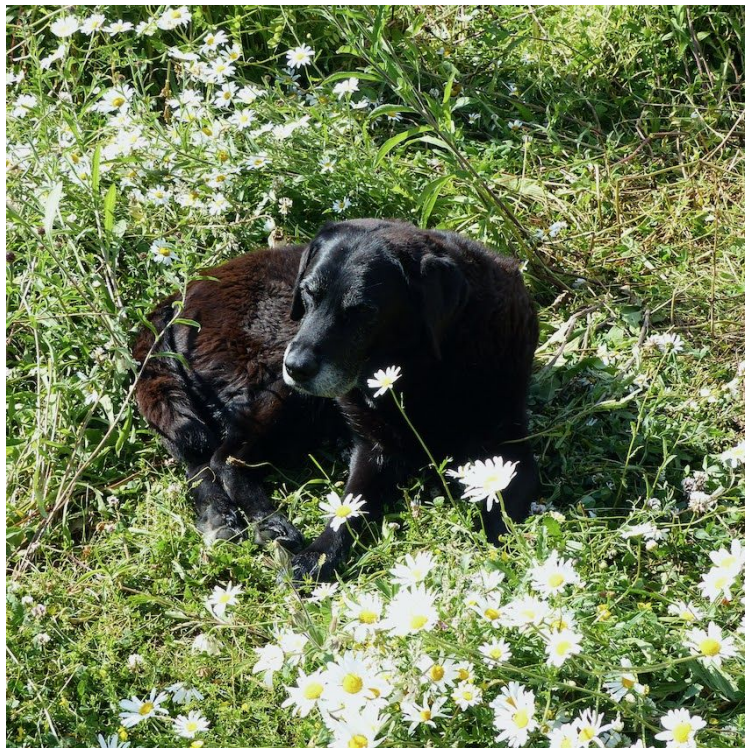
Learn & Enjoy

Some wildflowers will perform better than others, even if you've tried to get the mix right for your soil conditions.

We regularly go out across the summer months and pick as many different species as we can find, identifying them in our Sarah Raven Wildflower book. As a result, we were delighted to identify Viper's Bugloss even though it shouldn't enjoy our clay field. But, it did appear on one of the raised mounds which do drain more easily. Let's see if we get more.

Resources

- **'Making a Wildflower Meadow'**, Pam Lewis. We wish I'd discovered this book when we first started!
- **'Wildflowers'**, Sarah Raven, an encyclopaedia of British wildflowers, listed by common and Latin names and with advice on different environments and soil types.
- **'Creating a Flower Meadow'**, Yvette Verner



Ancient but Noble Angus had his favourite spot in the meadow.