

16 Meadow creation

Old meadows provide a home for many attractive wildflowers. A closer look will reveal an abundance of insect life, with grasshoppers, bees, butterflies and moths providing a hive of activity amongst the flowers and grasses. No wonder meadows have been the traditional places for picnics and summer walks.

Over 95% of our wildflower meadows have disappeared. Although they can never be exactly recreated, colourful wildflower meadows can be grown from scratch within two years, or in even less time from an existing area of lawn.

Converting an existing lawn into a meadow

If you are looking to turn your lawn into a wildflower meadow, try changing the way you mow as a first step. If you stop mowing during the summer months you will give the wildflowers in your lawn a chance to flower. If you have an old lawn or have recently acquired a patch of old meadow the results can be spectacular. But with most lawns, you will find that only typical lawn weeds' such as selfheal, yarrow and buttercup appear. Meadow species just won't be there to take up residence, so you will have to introduce them yourself. This can be done by 'over seeding' or by planting wildflowers.

Over seeding

Scattering wildflower seed over your lawn will not give much success. You will have to make gaps to give the seeds a chance to grow properly. The best way to do this is to remove whole squares of turf and top soil (at least 30cm x 30cm) and seed with one or two species of wildflower.



Planting pot grown wildflowers

Wildflowers can be introduced into lawns as pot grown plants. These can be bought from nurseries or grown yourself from seed, and planted in groups into the turf using a trowel. The more plants you introduce to the meadow, the more colourful it will become. Ideally plant in autumn to allow the roots to become established before competition from other plants builds up in the spring. To help reduce competition, spread a mulch around your new plantings or replace the turf upside down. Planting pot grown flowers is usually more successful than over seeding.



Creating a wildflower meadow from scratch

Preparing the ground

Good ground preparation is essential for success. The secret is to have soil with very low fertility. This is because a fertile soil will just cause the vigorous growth of a few grasses and these will crowd out the wildflowers. You can reduce fertility by stripping off the top 5-10 cm or so of topsoil and then lightly raking and rolling the soil to produce a fine, firm seed bed.

Sowing the seed

The best time to sow your wildflower seeds is in early autumn. You can sow in April, but many wildflower seeds need the cold winter months to break their inbuilt dormancy.

Remember:

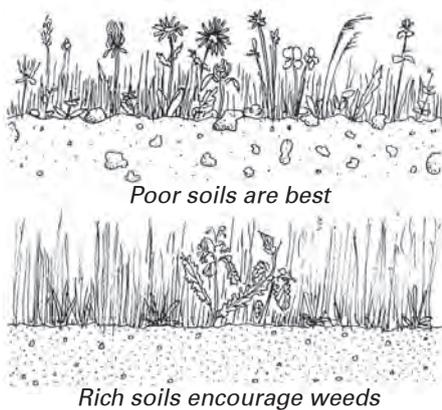
- You will find wildflower meadow seed mixes from many suppliers. You can supplement the mix with seeds from our top 20 wildflowers list (right). Sow them in clumps into an area lightly seeded with a natural grass mix.
- The sowing rate should be very low to avoid overcrowding. 0.5g of wildflower seed and 1.0 - 1.5g of grass mix per metre square is best.
- To get an even spread of seed, mix your seed with sand or sawdust before sowing.
- Immediately after sowing, rake the surface lightly and firm the bed with a small roller.

Aftercare

Take care to look after your new meadow.

- 1** When the seeds have germinated and the grasses reach a height of about 10cm, they should be cut. This will knock back unwanted 'weeds' such as groundsel and chickweed. Any thistles and docks should be dug up, removing the tap roots.
- 2** Before the first cut, roll the meadow with a light roller to firm the plants into the soil, this will ensure they do not get uprooted by the mower blade.
- 3** During the first year cut your meadow every 6 to 8 weeks. Always remove the cuttings to prevent a build up of dead plant material, which increases the soil fertility. Regular cutting will help the meadow species to become properly established and give a colorful display in future years.
- 4** In following years adopt a twice a year mowing pattern (see WAP17: Meadow Management)

Choosing the right species



Soils are very important in determining whether your meadow is going to be successful and what species you should choose. Some soils are naturally too rich to be worth bothering with, and some sites may be just too shady for meadow flowers to grow.



Top 20 wildflowers

| Wildflower | Soil type |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| Ox-eye daisy | A |
| Yarrow | A |
| Bugle | A |
| Selfheal | A |
| Salad burnet | B |
| Meadow cranesbill | B |
| Goat's beard | A |
| Lady's bedstraw | D |
| Cuckooflower | A |
| Devil's bit scabious | C |
| Perforate St Johns wort | A |
| Field scabious | D |
| Cowslip | B |
| Wild carrot | B |
| Yellow rattle | A |
| Meadow buttercup | A |
| Black-knapweed | D |
| Agrimony | A |
| Betony | A |
| Birds-foot trefoil | A |

Key

A: Does well on most soils

B: prefers limey less fertile soils

C: tolerates both acid and limey soils

D: prefers well drained soils

If you are going to seed an area with grasses avoid using perennial ryegrass or vigorous species. A mixture of bent and fescue grasses is best with a few of the more unusual meadow grasses such as meadow foxtail, timothy and sweet vernal grass.

Most gardens in Avon are likely to have a fairly rich, clayey soil, so we recommend you choose a mixture of plants from our list of the twenty best wildflowers.

There are a growing number of suppliers specialising in wildflower seeds and pot grown wildflowers, from which you can choose your mix (see WAP09: Suppliers).



Useful links

Seed suppliers and online advice:

www.wildseed.co.uk, www.wildflower.org.uk

People and Wildlife's Meadows project:

www.avonwildlifetrust.org.uk/PAWmeadows



RELATED PROJECTS: Meadow management (WAP17) • Suppliers (WAP09) • Caring for tools (WAP31)

16 Meadow creation **2**

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