

# WILDFLOWER LAWNS AND MEADOWS FOR HOME GARDENS

## WILDLIFE - FRIENDLY GARDENING

As towns cover ever more countryside with concrete, and farmland is increasingly intensively managed, the habitat provided by sympathetic management of domestic gardens can provide a valuable wildlife habitat, especially for birds and butterflies. One of the simplest ways of increasing the wildlife value of a domestic garden is to grow a 'wildflower lawn' instead of the conventional 'green desert'. Even better in a large garden is to dedicate an area perhaps more distant from the house to a 'wildflower meadow', which with its taller and less frequently cut vegetation is even more beneficial to wildlife.

## ADVANTAGES

Some of the advantages of wildflower lawns and meadows are:

- They support a wider range of beneficial insects than conventionally managed lawns and gardens
- These insects provide food for birds, ladybirds and if you are lucky perhaps a hedgehog
- Ladybirds and other predators spread out from the wild flower area to eat greenfly in the rest of the garden, reducing the need for artificial pest control
- The wildflowers provide visual interest throughout the summer
- They have much lower maintenance requirements than conventional gardens. Less maintenance facilitates a more relaxed enjoyment of the garden
- Their flexible requirements mean that if you go away for a month you don't have to mow the lawn the day you return.

## BASIC CONSIDERATIONS

British wildflowers are well adapted to the British climate, so they do not need as much cossetting as many conventional garden plants. However, this does not mean that they will grow if their seeds are scattered in a patch of weeds growing on a pile of rubble! Wildflower gardening needs as much planning soil preparation as when you grow conventional plants. Once your wildflower lawn or meadow is fully established, then you can relax and watch your neighbour mowing and weeding every weekend.

## PLANNING

Wildflower lawns and meadows are established by sowing a mixture of slow growing grasses with at least 6 species of wildflowers. The grass provides an overall soil cover for ecological and aesthetic purposes, the wildflower plants provide food and habitat for wildlife and a continually changing display of wildflowers throughout the summer.

**A wildflower lawn** is appropriate in even the smallest garden. It will look like any other lawn over the winter and early spring. The cutting regime can be very flexible. It is a good idea to mow it every couple of weeks until May (unless you have planted it with spring flowering bulbs). In May the first buttercups and burnets will flower, followed by a continuous succession of low growing wildflowers (white yarrow, purple selfheal, yellow birdsfoot trefoil, yellow ladies' bedstraw, spires of plantain and sorrel ) until the autumn. If at any time in the summer you feel the grass is getting too long, cut it (not too short) and the next flush of flowers will re-appear within two weeks.

The grasses and wildflower plants will withstand moderate treading and games, even a weekly garden party. However, if part of the area is expected to take regular heavy wear, ask for ryegrass to be included in the mixture for that part of the lawn. This will tend to grow more rapidly, but will blend into the rest of the lawn without abrupt contrast.

**A wildflower meadow** mixture is composed of slow growing grasses plus some taller grasses with 'architectural' flower heads and at least 10 species of wildflowers. The flowers include yarrow, oxeye daisy, wild carrot, birdsfoot trefoil, mallow, mullein, wild clary, tansy and yellow rattle. A wildflower meadow is appropriate in the more distant areas of large gardens especially if the garden is 'too big' for the owner's time or inclination. Steep banks, orchards and drive edges are also easily maintained and visually attractive if sown with a wildflower meadow mixture. Maintenance can be as little as one cut in autumn and one in spring, with the cutting decisions made flexibly in response to the owner's concepts of tidiness and time availability.

## HOW TO I DO IT?

- 1). If perennial weeds such as nettles, thistles, or docks are present in the area eliminate them first. If you don't, they will smother your wildflowers next year. Use a systemic weedkiller (one which contains 2,4-D will do the job) according to the recommendations on its label, and keep pets and children off the area for 24 hours.
- 2). At least two weeks after the last weedkiller spray, cut the existing vegetation (old lawn etc.) as low as possible.
- 3). If there is a thick thatch of turf (e.g. from an old lawn) and you are going to rotavate rather than hand dig the area, remove the turf to a compost heap.
- 4). Dig or rotavate the area.
- 5). Do not import topsoil to the area, even if your soil is pure sand or mainly stones. The only substrate which should be ameliorated is pure clay subsoil, in which case ensure adequate drainage and cover the surface with a few centimetres of weed-free topsoil, sand or peat.
- 6). Prepare a level, fine, firm, seedbed.
- 7). Sow your wildflower lawn or meadow mixture evenly over the area and rake it in so that the seed is incorporated no deeper than 2mm.

8). If you are sowing between April and October, roll the soil surface to get a good contact between the seed and the soil moisture. If sowing October to March, do not consolidate the soil surface or the winter rain will cap the soil and the seedlings may not emerge.

9). If you have a wet soil, or the area was previously grass, or if you have other reasons to expect a high population of slugs, scatter slug pellets over the area or in the edges next to existing grass. Slugs like eating wildflower seedlings!

10). Do not water your seedbed unless you are prepared to do so thoroughly every two days until it rains substantially.

11). If in the early months lots of annual weeds grow taller than the seedling grass and wildflowers, mow the area at 5 cm high every time the annual weeds grow taller than 10 cm. This will not harm your wildflowers, which spend their first few months as low growing rosettes.

### **HOW LONG BEFORE IT GERMINATES?**

In warm weather with plenty of soil moisture the area will begin to look green within a month. In dry soils, the seed may not germinate until the soil is moistened by a substantial rainfall. Sowing in late September or in late winter may not produce a green cover until the soil warms up in the spring.

### **WHEN CAN I WALK ON IT?**

Except for picking off surface stones, mowing or hand removing weeds, keep off your young plants until they are established. In most cases it is best not to walk on the area until the summer following sowing.

### **WHAT'S THE BEST TIME TO SOW?**

The first half of September or March-April, because the soil is warm and sufficient rain for germination and establishment is usually reliable

### **HOW MUCH SEED DO I NEED?**

For a wildflower lawn allow 10 grams of seed per square metre, so a standard 1 kg pack will sow 100 square metres (or an area 10 yards wide and 10 yards long). If you have a smaller area, keep the surplus seed for repairing any areas which do not establish well or become damaged later.

For wildflower meadows allow 5 grams of seed per square metre, thus a 1 kg pack is sufficient for 200 square metres.

### **HOW DO I ORDER THE SEED?**

Write, fax or e-mail Herbiseed with the size of the area, and if you can, describe the soil type. State whether you want a '**Wildflower lawn**' or a '**Wildflower meadow**'. Herbiseed will supply a standard mixture of widely tolerant species in packs of 1kg minimum. If you can describe your soil type, or if you would like a particular species of wildflower included, please ask and we will formulate an appropriate mixture.

## HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

1 kg. packs of either mixture cost £40. Please ask for bulk prices if you require more than 10 kg.

Herbiseed does not sell wildflower mixtures in packs smaller than 1 kg.

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