

## A wildflower lawn

A tidy, well manicured lawn is hard to maintain without using undesirable herbicides and it has little or no environmental benefit. So why not establish a more wildlife-friendly patch of ground that sports a range of interesting and attractive grasses and wild flowers?

You could simply stop cutting part or all of the lawn, possibly along an edge. The long grass would be used by beetles, small insects and seed eating birds, but it couldn't be described as a wildflower lawn or 'meadow'. Standard grass mixes contain very few different species and have a large proportion of tough rye grasses, so if you want a good mix of grasses and sedges, you'll need to remove the current lawn and start again.

Once you've raked the ground over, don't be tempted to simply sow a packet of seed and let nature get on with it. Like every other part of the garden, a wild flower lawn takes a few years to establish and this won't happen without a bit of work. Once established, your meadow will be easy to maintain.

The first step is deciding whether you want an annual or a perennial wildflower patch. If you sow an annual mix, you'll get an instant result. You'll enjoy a good show of flowers like corn marigold, cornflower and poppies. Unfortunately, these species thrive on disturbed ground, so you would need to cut and remove the vegetation in the autumn; cultivate and rake the soil the following spring and resow. I've discussed this with several people who were disappointed because none of the flowers they liked appeared again. They hadn't realised their meadow would behave like every other annual planting – it could only last one year.

With some extra work, you could establish a perennial patch. There are seed mixes to suit different growing conditions – sunny spots, dappled shade and wet or slightly moist areas. Try to find out which species grow naturally in your part of the country. Emorsgate Seeds, [www.wildseed.co.uk](http://www.wildseed.co.uk), are experts on grass and sedge seed and will give good advice. Many grasses have attractive seed heads like Quaking grass, *Briza media*, or Giant fescue, *Festuca gigantea*. Tufted hair grass, *Deschampsia cespitosa*, forms substantial tussocks while Common bent, *Agrostis capillaris*, is a fine, short grass that forms a dense sward. There is a grass for every location but don't forget rushes and sedges for damper areas: Pendulous sedge, *Carex pendularis*, is especially pretty.

Having decided on the grasses, the backcloth of the meadow, the next stage is to choose the flowers. It's very important to select native wild species as they're well adapted to fit in with the plant and soil life already in your garden. If buying at a garden centre, check you're not getting a Hungarian import. The best and most reliable source for Scottish wildflowers is Scotia Seeds, [www.scotiaseeds.co.uk](http://www.scotiaseeds.co.uk). Ragged robin, *Lychnis flos-cuculi* likes sunny damp places, Greater knapweed, *Centaurea scabiosa* drier sites, while low-growing Selfheal, *Prunella vulgaris* thrives in shadier places. I expect everyone would make room for some delightful spring primroses.

You can start a perennial meadow at any time during the growing season, other than perhaps July or August. Inevitably, there will be a large seedbed of weeds, so once you've dug and raked the soil, leave it for a few weeks to let some of these weeds germinate. Then hoe off the weeds and sow your grass mix. I recommend that you restrict sowing to grasses and sedges because wildflowers, especially the less vigorous ones, are unlikely to germinate and compete successfully with the tougher grasses. Sow the flower seed in seed trays and then put healthy young plants into the bed.

It sounds crazy, but you will need to weed your new bed. Remove any docks and nettles, as soon as they appear. Even some annuals, like willow herb, may be blown in from another garden, so should be candidates for your compost heap. The more robust ox-eye daisies, red campion or meadow cranesbill will attempt a take-over, so they should be controlled after the first year. Keep some of them, but leave space for the less vigorous species. Until the area is well established, and this will take a few years, you'll probably need to plant plugs of less vigorous species, such as Nottingham catchfly, *Silene nutans*. This delicate and rare species with its pale, night-scented flowers, is well worth cossetting. Good suppliers are: [www.wildflowershop.co.uk](http://www.wildflowershop.co.uk) and [www.habitataid.co.uk](http://www.habitataid.co.uk). Habitataid supplies turf already containing wildflowers. Check you're using native species.

Meadow grasses and flowers grow naturally on poor ground which would normally be grazed, possibly quite heavily, or cut for hay, so you should try to mimic this by reducing soil fertility. Impoverished soil will suit you plants much better than greedy dandelions and burdock. In the autumn, strim or scythe down the growth to around 5 - 8cm. Rake up and leave for about a week. The vegetation dries out and it will be easier for you to cart off to the compost bin.

Like everything in gardening, you reap what you sow, and your efforts will be well rewarded.