

Start a wildflower meadow



What you will need:

- wild meadow seed
- spade
- optional: black plastic sheeting

Step by step guide

1 What is a wildflower meadow? It's an area of permanent grass where wildflowers grow – not a bed of cornfield annuals like poppies, nor the gold themed flowers that were planted around the Olympic park.

The reason it's important to make the distinction is that a bed of poppies grows on fertile soil. Wildflower meadows grow better on unproductive soil, where vigorous grasses don't out-compete the flowers.

2 Choose your area. You might want to turn some of your lawn, an old flower border or other unused and open sunny spaces into an area full of wild grasses and wildflowers, reminiscent of the hay meadows of the past.

It needs to be open and sunny, but can be flat or sloping. A relatively large area is best, where you have space for growing a range of wildflowers.

3 Reducing the fertility. Your soil might be too rich for a meadow if it's had

plenty of fertiliser added over the years. The best way to reduce the fertility is to remove the top three to six inches of topsoil, using a turf cutter or a spade and muscle-power!

If you don't want to strip the soil, reduce some of the fertility by sowing an intermediate crop of mustard plants. Part of the brassica family they're notoriously hungry plants and will remove a lot of the nutrients from the soil as they grow.

4 Dig the soil and get rid of any weeds. Time for more backbreaking effort! You want to create a fine tilth (soil that looks like breadcrumbs) for seed sowing, as you would with a lawn.

Once you have bare soil, lay black plastic over it so that any weed seeds already in the soil germinate and die. Some people resort to chemicals at this stage if they are beset with nettles or docks.

5 Choose your wildflower seed mix.

Good mixes include:

- birds-foot trefoil (important for common blue butterfly caterpillars)
- common sorrel (important for small copper butterfly caterpillars)
- cowslip
- field scabious
- hoary plantain
- greater and common knapweed
- lady's bedstraw
- meadow buttercup
- ox-eye daisy
- red clover
- ribwort plantain
- wild carrot
- yarrow.

And the magic ingredient is yellow rattle, an annual flower that has a special ability to reduce the vigour of the grasses.

6 At last, sowing! This is the fun bit.

You need about five grams of seed per square metre of meadow. You'll want some wild grasses in there to make it feel like a meadow (they're very different from the perennial rye-grass you normally get in lawns). So include some bents, fescues and crested dogstail.

Just scatter the seed as you walk across the ground. To try and get an even coverage, split your seeds into batches and sow one batch walking in one direction and another batch walking at 90 degrees.

There's no need to rake the seed in or cover it with soil, but you may need to net it from birds.

Keep it well watered until it has established.

7 Aftercare.

In first growing season, cut in midsummer and remove all the dead spent material (known as the arisings).

In subsequent seasons, the main method for managing a meadow is to not mow from early April to late July, August or even early September. Cut the hay in dry weather – it will probably be too high for a mower, so use grass shears or you might even want to do it the old way with a scythe. Leave it lying on the ground for up to a week for the seeds to drop, and then clear it all away for compost. Give the meadow a couple more mows during the autumn and maybe once in early spring if it needs it. You may need to do some 'spot' weeding, such as nettles, dock and thistles.