

HOME LEARNING ACTIVITY:

MAKING A WILDFLOWER MEADOW

A wildflower meadow is an area of permanent grass where wildflowers grow.



The Best Site for a Wildflower Meadow

Most wildflowers like plenty of sunlight, so make sure your site is not shaded by large trees or tall buildings. Think about the soil type - wildflower meadows are often most successful on nutrient-poor soils where they don't need to compete with plants such as docks, thistles and nettles. It doesn't matter whether the site is flat or sloping.

Deciding Whether to Plant or Seed Your Wildflower Meadow

Site preparation: pre-grown plants need less initial site preparation, but cost more than seeds (especially for a big area).

Time of year: lots of wildflower seeds need a period of cold to germinate, while pre-grown plants are already established and can be planted later in the year.

Patience: seeds take longer to show results than pre-grown plants, but will surprise you once they get going.

Planting a Wildflower Meadow

A patch of lawn in an open, sunny position can be transformed into a mini wildflower meadow. Maintenance is much easier than with a traditional lawn, but it can take a number of years for the balance between grass and wildflowers to be established.

1. Before planting, stop using any fertilisers and weed-killers. Keep the grass very short and remove all clippings to prevent nutrients returning to the soil.

2. Plant in autumn - choose small plug plants and plant them in small groups of the same plant, to give a natural appearance. Make a small hole for each plant and add a little compost to the bottom of the hole to help the plant establish quickly.
3. Water the plants well and add some leaf mould around each one, to deter competition from grasses.
4. Don't cut the grass until the end of the summer to allow the wildflowers to set for the following year.

Sowing a Wildflower Meadow

1. Early spring or autumn are the best times to sow, as the soil is neither too wet nor too dry.
2. Prepare the soil well - dig it over and remove all plants and weeds that could compete with your seeds. For large areas, another option is to cover with black plastic or a weed-suppressing membrane for at least three months prior to sowing. Remove large stones and larger clumps of soil, then rake the soil so it is fine and crumbly.
3. Leave the prepared soil for at least 2 weeks for the soil to settle and for any weed seeds that are lying dormant in the soil to germinate. Spray or hoe any new growth off before sowing.
4. Scatter seeds over the soil by hand, a little at a time for an even spread. Mixing the seed with silver sand will make it easier to spread it thinly.
5. Rake the soil gently to just cover the seeds with a very thin layer (1 mm) of fine crumbly soil. Be careful not to bury them as they need sunlight.
6. Very gently water the whole area with a watering can. Be very careful not to wash the seeds away.
7. Mark the new area of planting clearly so that new shoots are not mistaken for weeds.
8. Make sure the soil remains moist and water it if dry. Seedlings can be killed if the soil dries out completely.
9. Protect the seeds by making your own bird scarers from CDs or a scarecrow. Be prepared to protect seeds with netting if birds continue to be a problem.
10. Seeds should germinate within a couple of weeks (weather dependent).
11. By weeks 16-20 the display will be at its peak and you should be able to spot many insects making the most of it.
12. From week 20 onwards, the flowers will fade and produce seed that will be scattered by the wind and grow into plants the following year.



WARNING

To protect wildflowers already growing in the countryside from cross-pollination with flowers in your seed kit, don't sow seeds in or near open countryside or nature reserves.

Choosing Wildflower Plants or Seeds For Your Meadow

Try to choose a colourful mix of UK native wildflowers. Native plants are those that originally arrived in the area without human intervention. They will have evolved a complex relationship with the other plants and animals around them and each will have a role to play in a particular area e.g. as a food source for a particular bee or butterfly. For example: **bird's foot trefoil** is important for the common blue butterfly caterpillar; **common sorrel** is important for small copper butterfly caterpillars; and **yellow rattle** has the special ability to reduce the vigour of grasses. Introducing non-native species can upset the natural balance that has been established and can cause harm to other wildlife.

Also try to include a mix of annual, perennial and biennial species in your selection:

Annual plants - plants that die every year. They grow from seed, bloom, produce seeds, and die in one growing season. They then need to be replanted each spring.

Perennial plants - plants that continue to live for several years. They return year after year and continue growing until they reach maturity, which varies by plant but averages three to five years.

Biennial plants - plants that end their life cycle after 2 years.