

# Go Wild!

**Rufus Bellamy, BH&HPA national adviser on conservation and environmental management, explains how wild flowers make a park more beautiful and more wildlife friendly**





## Enhancing conservation

**Strolling through the meadow at Oakdown Touring and Holiday Home Park was one of last year's highlights. As owner Doreen Franks proudly showed me what she had created in the middle of the Devonshire park's new golf course, it was very clear to me that wildflowers offer parks a fantastic opportunity to add something really special to the holiday experience.**

*'When we were putting in the new course, I said that I would claim two areas for wildflowers,' Doreen told me as we walked knee-high through a dense swath of wildflowers. She stopped every few steps to identify one of the nodding flower heads, corncockle, hedge bedstraw and red campion amongst them. 'It needs quite a bit of dedication,' she added, joking that although she spends a lot of the time on her golf course, she never touches a golf club from one end of the year to the next. 'It's worth it though - not just for the beauty of the flowers and the good it does for butterflies and other insects, but because of how it enhances the park and people's holidays. In June I walk through our park and can spot 40-50 types of flowers, most of them native. I love it!'*

Oakdown sells itself as a particularly beautiful wildlife destination and advertises its wildflower-rich country gardens and walks on its website. It is an approach many other parks across the country are starting to take and there is therefore great interest in how to bring the beauty of wildflowers onto

parks. This 'naturalistic' approach to landscape planting is also an important move that parks can make to help the countryside. This conservation argument for planting the right native wildflowers in the right place is summed up by the plight of the bumblebee.

A bumblebee buzzing its way from flower to flower is one of the defining images (and sounds) of a summer's day in the countryside. However, these iconic insects, which are so important as pollinators to many wild plants and commercial crops, are in peril. Of a total of 25 native species, three are already extinct, at least five are in a precarious situation and many of the others have seen their range dramatically reduced. The decline of these animals is primarily due to modern, chemically-intensive agricultural practices, which have destroyed natural habitats such as hedgerows and meadows along with the wild flowers and other plants that used to grow in them. Once these food plants are gone, so the insects that depend on them go too. Birds and mammals follow.

One of the big casualties of this destruction has been species-rich neutral grasslands. These are now rare. It is estimated that between 1930 and 1984 there was a 97% decline in such semi-natural grassland in the UK. This level of destruction makes the planting of habitats rich in wildflowers and other native plants an incredibly important project.

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## The benefits of nature

Someone who knows just how important is the agronomist Marek Nowakowski, who is part of an organisation called the Farmed Environment Company (FEC). The FEC has been working to develop techniques in which landowners can 'farm' biodiversity. *'My philosophy is simple,'* says Marek. *'If you put back natural habitats then nature will find them and nature will benefit. If you can sow winter bird food or pollen or nectar sources in the form of native wild flowers then you will be doing something of immense importance.'*

On the farms where Marek has been putting in flower rich grasslands and other important habitats, the number of butterflies and other insects have increased dramatically. For example, on one farm four butterfly species - marbled white, small copper, small heath and common blue - apparently colonised only after his planting plan had been put in place.

Another reason why planting the right native wildflowers is such a good idea is that some non-native plants that have been introduced into the countryside are having a negative impact on the UK's flora. Invasive species such as Japanese knotweed can quickly and dramatically colonise wild areas and displace native plants, while 'crossing' between wild and introduced varieties can lead to the erosion of native genetic variation. There is growing concern amongst many botanists that the, often well-meaning, introduction of non-native wildflowers, and even native wildflowers that are not appropriate to a specific region, is in danger of destroying the unique patterns that make up the patchwork of the British countryside.

## Where to start?

According to the experts, park owners and managers should ask themselves two questions: *'What kind of a site do I have?'* and *'What do I want to achieve?'* The nature of a park - its layout, location, aspect, climate and soil - will dictate, to a large extent, which wildflower habitats can be created and which plants can be planted. However, any project should also be undertaken with the priorities of the park in mind - are you going down the wildflower trail primarily to make the park more beautiful, or are conservation and education other key goals?

*'Grassland is undoubtedly the main area where parks can diversify with wildflowers,'* advises Richard Brown, the manager of Emorsgate Wild Seeds, a company that supplies seeds from native British wildflowers that are derived from stock collected from the wild. *'Clearly the areas where pitches are located and where there is continual mowing are not the best spots, but other grassland areas around the edge of pitches and along the borders and boundaries of a park provide an excellent opportunity for wildlife planting.'*

According to Richard, soil fertility is the most important issue that anyone considering planting wildflowers should consider. Highly fertile soil, for example agricultural land that has had a lot of fertiliser applied in the past, will not make a good home for wildflowers which are suited to 'poor' soil and which are rapidly out-competed by more vigorous plants. *'Poorer soils will almost always produce more varied and more attractive vegetation, and will be easier to manage,'* he advises. *'If you have a rich site full of nettles and docks then this is not a good*



starting point. So look for an area where the soil is naturally poor and these plants are not growing well.'

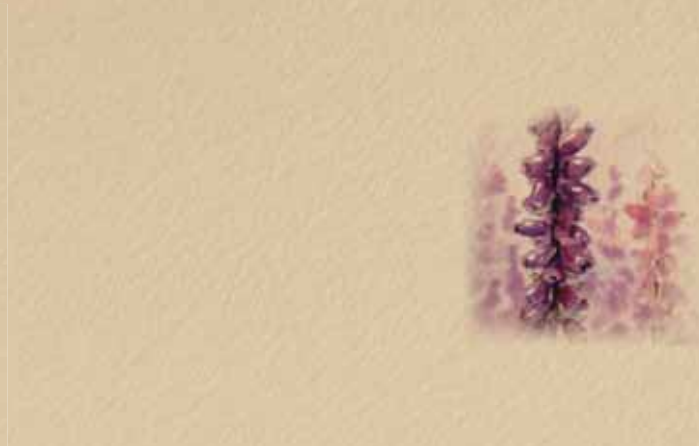
The plant conservation charity Plantlife, in its briefing sheet 'Make Your Own Wildlife Meadow' suggests a weedy lawn can be one good starting point for a wildflower meadow.

Indeed, it is often surprising what wild gems are waiting to pop up from a previously close-mown lawn - in some cases planting will be unnecessary and natural regeneration will do most of the work. 'The easiest thing to do is to allow the area you have allocated to grow one summer and see what comes up,' says the organisation, which campaigns for plant conservation internationally. 'If you find you have some attractive species that you'd like to keep, then simply weed out the more aggressive perennial weeds, such as thistles or nettles, and add wildflower plugs or additional seed.'

The other way forward is, as Plantlife puts it, to 'start from scratch'. This means removing the top soil, removing existing weeds and other competing plants and then sowing with a selection of wild seeds that suit the type of soil you've got and the prevailing conditions. Of course you should not fertilise at any point in this process!

Doreen Franks tried a variant of this approach: 'We had a swing shovel working on the park and I got the operator to take up the turf and bury it grass side down,' she explains. 'Then we put a lime strip through the area to create an area for calcareous flowers. We seeded that bit with a calcareous mix and put in a general purpose mixture over the other 50%.'

Other parks have not taken such an 'extreme' approach, sowing wildflower seeds onto existing grassland that has been simply cut back a number of times (the clippings removed to reduce nutrients) or heavily grazed and opened up with a harrow or rake. For example, at Moss Wood Park in Lancashire the groundsman, Chris Peacock, has been hard at work creating a wildflower meadow on ex-agricultural land. Chris removed the worst of the dead vegetation on his chosen patch and seeded with a butterfly mix from Landlife Wildflowers, a seed supplier that is part of an environmental charity that works to bring people and wildlife closer together. Chris found that the main thing he has needed to do is to agitate the seeds with a gentle raking. 'The meadow looks very nice,' he says of the area which boasts foxgloves, red campion, primrose and corncockle amongst its species. 'We got a lot of positive comments last year.'



## Choosing seeds

The choice of seeds is obviously of critical importance to both the look and the success of a wildflower project. As aforementioned, seeds and seed mixtures must be chosen to suit the site and to suit the project. In fact, one of the best ways of deciding what to plant is to find out what native wildflowers are growing wild nearby. With care, seeds can actually be collected from places such as road verges. Locally-sourced seed-rich hay can also be used as a seed source. However, the easiest option is definitely to go to a seed supplier.

Look through the catalogues and websites of most wildflower seed suppliers (see page 51 for contact details) and you'll see that they have products for most needs and soil types - which is a key determinant of what will grow. For example, Emorsgate seeds provides meadow mixtures for clay soils, loamy soils, chalk and limestone soils, sandy soils, and wetlands. According to Emorsgate only a general assessment of soil type is necessary. However, if you are unsure of what kind of soil you have, there are many DIY soil pH test kits to help you.

From a conservation point of view, one of the most important issues to consider is where the seeds you are planting have come from. 'There is a lot of rubbish out there,' cautions Sue Everett, a consultant ecologist who works with Flora Locale. Flora Locale promotes the use of appropriate species of common and widespread British wild plants for large-scale habitat creation and restoration in Britain. 'Some seed mixtures you might be offered contain non-native and cultivated species, so you have to be careful.' *continued...*



So as to minimise the possibility of new planting negatively affecting native flora in the wider countryside, Flora Locale recommends using species only within their existing and historic wild range. It also recommends using stock of British indigenous origin and, if planting near an ecologically sensitive area, only using stock sourced from a similar habitat type nearby.

*'If I am within three fields of an ancient meadow then I don't plant anything at all,'* Marek from the FEC counsels: a good rule of thumb. In fact all parks should be aware that advice should be sought from the country nature conservation agency if a planting scheme is to take place close to or within a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or a European protected area.

*'It doesn't have to be complicated,'* says Sue. *'Just do your homework and ask your seed supplier the right questions.'* Sue's advice is to go to the flora locale list of suppliers (see page 51 for contact details) and try and find one close to where you are based. She also encourages park owners and managers to look at ways of mirroring unique or interesting habitats and species from their locality on their park. *'A park on the edge of Dartmoor might look at the area's very distinctive grasslands and grow appropriate plug plants,'* she says adding that local Wildlife Trusts will be a good source of information - as will local seed suppliers themselves.

Just as important as getting the seed mixture and planting right is good management. Here nature can lend a hand in the shape of Yellow Rattle, a beautiful native flower that is also a partial parasite and will keep down certain grasses and allow wildflowers to thrive. It is a good thing to sow in your meadow!

A wildflower meadow itself is mainly made up of perennials that take up to two years to establish and flower. It is particularly important to control weeds in the crucial first year with regular mowing or grazing. Sue advises that in the first year the meadow should be cut back to about 20cm in May to stop the emerging wildflowers being smothered by weeds. This height will allow Yellow Rattle to continue to grow. On each mow all clippings should ideally be removed so that the nutrient level of the soil remains low.

*'The fertility of the site will dictate the intensity of management in the first and later years. On the very poorest soils cutting or grazing may not be required,'* says Richard from Emorsgate. *'On the richest, frequent cutting will be needed, and the cuttings may have to be removed to prevent die back of the sown species.'* When a meadow has become established, Richard advises that there is room for park owners and managers to experiment with management regimes - a decision that will help determine the 'finished product'. *'You can do anything from a relaxed mowing regime that will produce a lawn with occasional flowering to a once-a-year cut that will produce a tussocky meadow,'* he says.

At Oakdown, Doreen underlines the value of careful management: *'I think the most important thing we do is our mowing regime. We cut once a year at the end of August or the beginning of September and we take all the cuttings away. This means that there is still a growing period left and the meadow will not look totally scalped during the winter.'*



## Wildflower meadows

One other park which shows just what can be done is Kelling Heath in North Norfolk. *'We have a big wildflower meadow at Kelling Heath of about one acre,'* says David Martin, the park's countryside manager. *'The meadow was prepared and seeded six years ago. It is cut once a year after the flowers have seeded in late July, then the cuttings are baled and taken off site. The only problem we have is ragwort which creates a challenge when it comes to baling, as we can't give the bales away. Our approach is to let the ragwort grow and then have a big pick before baling.'*

Despite his ragwort problem (the plant contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids which are poisonous to horses and other farm animals such as sheep and cattle), David is very pleased with the biodiversity he and his team have helped create. *'We did a survey last summer. Ox-eye daisy, meadow crane's-bill, knapweed, ragged robin, common vetch, bird's-foot trefoil and yarrow, were just some of the species that we found.'*

He is pleased with the impact the meadow has on the park's guests. *'Our visitors really enjoy it. We have cut a path through the meadow and put up seasonal interpretation boards to tell everybody what they can see.'* David hopes to have a larger interpretation board in place soon to give an overall picture of the wildflower work he is doing - vital when the environment is central to his park's appeal. *'It's our niche in the market - people come here because of the environment on the park and the wildflower meadow is a big part of that. We get 80% returns, so people obviously like what they see.'*



Kelling Heath's work creating its wildflower meadow is only one aspect of what the park is doing to help native species. It has also seeded native wildflowers along the verges of its main roads and has set up a 'demonstration plot' to show caravan owners what they should plant around their pitches.

As Kelling Heath shows, the possibilities for introducing wildflowers are extensive. Do not think that you have to set aside a specific 'meadow' area. Formal beds can be planted with wild flowers, such as foxgloves and common comfrey, in amongst the cultivars. Ponds and wetland areas provide a great opportunity to grow wild aquatic plants, such as arrowhead and marsh marigold. As many ponds in the wild have been filled in, this work is particularly important.

Woodlands provide the opportunity to establish some of the most beautiful of British wildflowers such as bluebells and bugle; while borders, such as hedges and fences offer the chance to provide a place for birds and other animals to make a nest by planting and managing native plants such as bramble and sweet briar rose.

In fact the opportunities for using wild flowers to make a park more beautiful and more wildlife friendly are almost as varied as the number of wild flowers you can plant. At Oakdown, for example, Doreen has planted wildflowers around the park's reed bed sewage filtration system - confirming the fact that wildflowers really can give any park the sweet smell of success.

## Seed Suppliers

Flora Locale's website has a comprehensive listing of seed suppliers and advice on what to look out for. Go to [www.floralocale.org](http://www.floralocale.org) and click on the 'suppliers' link.

### Emorsgate Seeds

Limes Farm,  
Tilney All Saints,  
King's Lynn,  
Norfolk  
PE34 4RT  
Tel: 01553 829 028  
[www.wildseed.co.uk](http://www.wildseed.co.uk)

### Landlife

National Wildflower Centre,  
Court Hey Park,  
Liverpool L16 3NA  
Tel: 0151 737 1819  
[www.landlife.org.uk](http://www.landlife.org.uk)

## Where to go for advice

If you are considering a wildflower planting scheme, or would like some help to see what the possibilities on your park are, then there are many places you can go for assistance. Professional advice can be sought from a qualified ecologist - your local wildlife trust ([www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org)) should be able to put you in touch with one or offer expert help itself. The organizations mentioned in this article also provide lots of help, advice and information - including on-line advice sheets - on their websites.

### Plantlife

14 Rollestone Street  
Salisbury  
Wiltshire  
SP1 1DX  
Tel: 01722 342730  
[www.plantlife.org.uk](http://www.plantlife.org.uk)

### Farmed Environment Company

Pound Farm  
Sweffling  
Saxmundham  
IP17 2BU  
Tel: 01728 664 149  
[www.f-e-c.co.uk](http://www.f-e-c.co.uk)

### Flora locale

Denford Manor  
Hungerford  
Berkshire  
RG17 0UN  
Tel: 01488 680 457  
[www.floralocale.org](http://www.floralocale.org)

### Recommended reading

**Creating a flower meadow** by Yvette Verner  
published by Green Books  
ISBN: 1-9003-2208-0

**How to make a wildlife garden** by Chris Baines  
published by Frances Lincoln  
ISBN: 0-7112-1711-4

**Making Wildflower Meadows** by Pam Lewis  
published by Frances Lincoln  
ISBN: 0-7112-2133-2

**Wild Flowers of Britain and Ireland** (a photographic field guide) by Rae Spencer-Jones and Sarah Cuttle  
published by Kyle Cathie  
ISBN: 1-85626-503-X ●

