

# Making a mini meadow

GWF483

Updated September 2007

**There are many ways to introduce wild flowers into your garden, and creating a mini-meadow is one of the most rewarding, even in a small area.**

You can create your own mini-meadow either by enriching existing areas of turf with additional bulbs and plants, or by starting with seeds.

## **Planting wild flowers into existing grass**

Planting a selection of bulbs or pot-grown plants into existing turf is an effective way of brightening up areas of lawn or long grass. However, don't waste your money sowing wild flower seeds into established grass, as they stand little chance of survival.

Autumn is the best time to plant bulbs and pot-grown plants. This will give them time to get established before the grass starts growing again next spring. Choose species according to how you plan to manage the grass. A 'flowery lawn' is cut regularly except for a few weeks in May-June, so plants must tolerate this. Meadows should concentrate on spring flowers (cut in July and November) or summer flowers (cut in April and November). See *Wildflowers for gardens* GWF482 for suggestions of suitable plants to include. Never take plants or seeds from natural wild habitats.

### **Bulbs**

Lift a section of turf to expose the soil. Plant with a bulb-planter or narrow-bladed trowel. As a general rule, big bulbs such as wild daffodils should be covered

with 10-15cm of soil, while smaller ones such as crocus or snowdrops should be planted no more than 5cm deep. Replace the turf after you've planted.

### **Pot-grown plants**

Planting pot-grown flowers will give quick results. If they aren't available at your local garden centre, see GWF484 for suppliers or raise them yourself from seed.

To aid establishment, remove areas of turf and plant the wild flowers into bare ground. The grass will eventually self-seed and fill in the gaps. Mowing the grass beforehand will also help to reduce competition for light while the plants get established.

Aim to give your meadow a natural look. Go for bold groups of colour and arrange drifts of one species so that they are more densely planted in the middle than at the edge. Wild flowers should be planted at a rate of 6-10 per sq m.

Buying a lot of pot-grown plants can be expensive. Plugs are cheaper, and you can plant them straight out if the grass is not too vigorous. Otherwise grow them on in pots first.

### **Raising from seed**

Individual wild flowers may be started off in seed trays using multi-purpose compost. Perennials can be sown in autumn and planted out in spring, or sown in spring for autumn planting.

Germination may be erratic so don't empty your seed trays too soon. A few species, including clustered bellflower and cowslip, require a cold spell before they germinate. Sow in autumn and keep outdoors, or put in a sealed polythene bag and keep in the fridge for six weeks after sowing.

Once the seedlings are large enough to handle, pot them on into small individual pots. Keep autumn sowings in a coldframe or unheated greenhouse over winter, and spring sowings in a sheltered spot for the summer. If spring-sown plants start to flower, cut them back. This will divert the plant's energy back into its root system where it's needed most at this stage of development.

### **Sowing a meadow direct**

To achieve a range of wild flowers for the lowest cost, you can sow your mini-meadow direct on to bare earth. This is likely to be most successful on poor soils; rich soils encourage coarse grasses and unwanted wild flowers such as docks and thistles.

If your soil is especially rich in nutrients, you could try growing a crop of potatoes, brassicas or courgettes for a couple of years to reduce soil fertility. Alternatively, grow a green manure and instead of digging it in, remove it to the compost

heap and use it to build up nutrients in another part of the garden. Another strategy would be to strip off the topsoil, though this is only practical for small areas.

#### **When to sow**

Early September to mid-October is a good time to sow a meadow mixture. This should produce a decent covering of grass before the onset of winter, and keep weeds down. Spring is the next best time, if possible before the start of May, but species needing a cold period won't germinate until the following year.

#### **DIY or prepared mixture?**

Making up your own seed mix allows you to pick and choose the species, but it may work out a lot more expensive than buying a ready-made mixture. Most specialists (see GWF484) stock a wide variety of meadow mixtures. Some offer a choice of seed collected from natural meadows, and mixtures that they have made themselves, and most cater for a range of soil types - wet, sandy, clay, chalky and so on. They also include mixtures for different situations - meadow, hedgerows, pond edges and woodland for example, or for particular purposes such as attracting butterflies or bees.

Most mixtures contain about 80 per cent grass seed and 20 per cent wild flowers by weight. They may include annual flowers as well as perennials, to give more colour in the first year, but these will not survive once the grasses and perennials are established.

#### **Clearing the site**

It is vital to clear the ground of perennial weeds. If you don't eliminate invasive weeds such as couch grass and ground elder, they will swamp the more attractive wild flowers. Dig out as many of the weeds as possible,

then lay a sheet of clear polythene over the top to encourage the growth of any bits you leave behind. When these have reached a height of 5cm or more, dig them out, or use a glyphosate-based weedkiller. You should wait four weeks before sowing, to give it time to work.

#### **How to sow**

Break up any clods of earth and rake the soil to a fine tilth - but never add fertiliser. Mix the seed with fine sand to help you sow more evenly. When finished, run the back of a rake over the surface of the soil, taking care not to bury the seed too deeply.

If you need to water, use a can with a fine rose which will prevent the top layer of soil from compacting. Don't use a hose as it may wash the seed out of the soil.

#### **Looking after your meadow**

##### **The first year**

Most meadow mixtures will benefit from being cut once a month in their first year so that the developing seedlings receive enough air, light and water. Wait until the sward has reached a height of 10cm before cutting it back by half. Cut to the same height each month, giving a final cut in September or October. Remove the clippings to keep nutrient levels down.

##### **Subsequent years**

By the second year, the perennials should start to flower and set seed - the meadow shouldn't be cut until this has happened. If you have a spring-flowering meadow (May-July), cut in late June or early July and again in November. Most other kinds of meadow can be cut twice a year, once in late spring and then again in late autumn. Few mowers will tackle a meadow, so use shears, a nylon line trimmer, sickle - or hire a power scythe for large areas.

After the first year, leave the

cut hay for a day or two before raking it up, to allow the plant seeds to be shed. Add the hay to your compost heap. Bear in mind that, if you plan to use the compost in more formal parts of the garden, composting may not kill off all the grass and flower seeds.

#### **Weeds**

Invasive weeds must be kept under control or they will quickly ruin your meadow. Use a spot weedkiller, which you can apply carefully on to the weeds without getting any on the other plants. Weedkillers don't cause any disturbance but if you prefer, hand-weed regularly.

#### **Yellow rattle**

Yellow rattle, *Rhinanthus major*, is a pretty meadow annual that is semi-parasitic on most species of grass, and so helps to control its vigour. The seed should be scattered into existing turf in late summer, and will germinate the following spring. It will self-seed if left uncut until July.

#### **Growing annuals**

Meadows can take several years to mature. Cornfield mixtures give quick results but they need to be managed differently.

A simple mix may include cornflower, field poppy, corn marigold, corncockle (which has poisonous seeds) and corn chamomile. Corn marigold does not self-seed readily, and has the reputation of disappearing after the first year. Cornfield mixtures don't normally include grass, but try adding some wheat or barley for added realism.

Cornfield annuals are best sown direct in the autumn, and will flower in their first summer. To perpetuate the display from one year to the next, you must cultivate the soil after cutting the area back in late summer. This simulates the action of a plough turning over the soil.