

Making a mini-meadow in your garden, school field or a raised bed

Making a mini-meadow is an easy way of creating a small wildflower area in your garden, in part of a school field or in a raised flower bed. There are two ways to do this:

- sowing wildflower seed
- plug planting.

For both methods it is important that no compost, manure or fertiliser has been added to the soil as wildflowers prefer soil with low nutrients. It is also important you can access the patch where you are creating the meadow so that you can mow the meadow later on in the year and remove the mown cuttings.

Each method has different stages but the principles are the same for any small area of ground or flower bed.

Depending on the size of the wildflower meadow area you want to make, you may want to think about contracting someone to help you. The leaflets on creating grassland through [natural regeneration](#), [green hay](#), [brush-harvested seed](#) or a [seed mixture](#) are useful step-by-step guides for meadow creation on larger areas.

Grow your own mini garden meadow



You will need:

- Spare patch of the garden

an area that hasn't had fertiliser or compost added
- Packet of meadow flower seeds

- Grass seed

- Handful of sand

- Rake

- Shears

- Twiggly branches


- Remove grass, weeds and the top layer of soil, then lightly rake.

- Mix together 1 part wildflower seed with 4 parts grass seed and some sand.
 this will help you see where you're sowing
- Sprinkle your seed mix in spring or autumn.

5g of seed per metre² of soil
- Walk over the soil and water lightly.

- Arrange branches over your seeds to keep animals out.

- Cut in summer to 5-10cm high and compost the cuttings.


Don't take seeds from the wild - always buy specially-grown seeds.

Cornfield annuals will flower in the first year. Perennial meadows often need two years.

Illustration: Corinne Welch © Copyright Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts 2015

www.wildlifewatch.org.uk

Choosing your seed

For smaller areas you will need wildflower seed without any grass seed. Grass will re-grow from the turned over vegetation or will seed naturally into the area, and it can sometimes compete and inhibit the growth of wildflowers. You can either get mixtures of seeds or select specific species. There is a [Code of Practice and Suppliers list](#) for native wildflower seed.

Make sure that the species include perennial wildflowers like oxeye daisy, common knapweed, self-heal and red clover. See our [wildflower identification guide](#) for more details on how to recognise these flowers. Poppies, cornflower, corncockle and corn marigold are annual cornfield flowers and will not appear after the first year without turning over the soil again. Cornfield flowers require different management than meadow wildflowers but can be used to provide a colourful beginning in the first year as it is unlikely that meadow wildflower seed will have grown enough to flower in this time period. Meadow wildflowers should flower from the second year onwards after the annuals have disappeared.

Sowing a mini-meadow from seed

Preparing the area

Start by preparing the area. Over 50% of the area and ideally 75-90% should be bare ground as wildflower seed needs to touch earth to germinate. There are several ways you can create bare ground:

- dig over the ground turning the soil over and burying the grass vegetation. Rake the surface to smooth afterwards;
- rake and harrow the ground pulling out any moss and grass, and fluffing the soil surface;
- if you are using a flower bed or raised bed remove all of the other plants and turn over the soil.

Sowing the seed

Mix the seed with some sand as this makes it easier to spread the seed thinly on the soil surface and see where you have already scattered. The seed should not be buried like vegetable seed. Wildflowers naturally shed seed on the soil surface and the small packet of energy that each seed carries to provide food for the first few weeks will not be able to sustain seedlings if they have to push their way up through the soil.

Seed is best sown from August to December, although September to October are the better months. Many seeds need to go through the process of vernalisation (freeze and thaw whilst the seed is damp) which triggers the seed to germinate. Sowing in the autumn will enable natural freeze and thaw processes to take place in the winter.

Seed can be sown in the spring, preferably March and April, but artificial vernalisation might be needed to trigger germination. This is called stratification and the seeds should be dampened and put into a freezer for a period of time before being taken out in the spring and sown straight away. Delay may mean that the seed germinates before sowing, and the firming in process can damage young roots and shoots.

Caring for your mini-meadow

After spreading the seed on the soil surface you will need to walk lightly over the area to push the seeds onto the soil so that the roots can grow properly. Lightly water the seed or if sowing in the autumn you could let rain do the work for you.

Water seedlings during a dry spring as the short roots might not be able to reach any moisture. Once the seedlings have a few proper leaves they should be able to cope by themselves unless it is a very hot dry summer.



If there are lots of pets in the area you may want to cover the area with cut branches to stop animals digging up and fouling the ground. Remember to take the branches off as the plants grow, otherwise it will make cutting the vegetation more difficult.

In the first summer following sowing seed, you should cut the vegetation keeping it at a height of 5-10 cm. It is unlikely that meadow wildflowers will bloom during this first summer, and keeping the vegetation short will help the leaf rosettes form without competition for light with taller growing vegetation. However, if your seed mixture contained annual cornfield flowers do not cut the vegetation as you will remove the flowering spikes and they will not be able to bloom.

Using plug plants to create a mini-meadow

Plug plants are seeds grown in trays or cells. See the guidance note on how to grow plug plants for information about the method. Plugs can be inserted into existing grassland or can be used similar to bedding plants in a flower- or raised-bed.

Plugs are ready to be planted out between May to June once they have a few true leaves.

Inserting plugs into grassland is relatively easy but can take some time, especially if there are lots of them to transplant. The pots

should be inverted from below to produce the plug of soil and root-ball which is ideal for transplantation directly into the recipient site.

In terms of inserting plugs into grassland there are two schools of thought:

- i. dig a hole approximately the same size and depth as the plug and inset the plug (teasing out a few roots to help the plug root into the soil); or
- ii. dig a hole that is larger but the same depth as the plug. The plug is put into the hole (teasing out a few roots) and the surrounding area is filled in with earth (remove vegetation from the earth).

The second process may help plants to establish as it will take a while for grass to grow into the bare soil. However, it is not practical on every site, increases the amount of work and creates lots of circles of bare earth surrounding plug plants that will last for a few months. Where competition for light is thought to be a problem because of quick growing grasses, then the second method is practical. But where competition for light is not thought to be a problem the first option is the better. Plugs should be planted randomly throughout the area, more than 30 cm apart (one foot). This gives them space to expand. Grouping plants into threes, fives or sevens of different species will create pockets of wildflowers scattered throughout the area and make aftercare easier.

In flower- and raised-beds, holes should be dug in a similar manner to planting a cultivated flower and the roots should be teased out to help the plant establish in the earth. As the soil is already bare, the plugs can be placed closer together at 15-30 cm (half-a-foot to one foot). Fill the whole bed with different species of wildflowers so that you create a floral display that will bloom from the end of spring into the summer.

Ensure that plugs in grassland or beds are well firmed in so that roots touch the soil. They will also need to be watered immediately following planting, and if there is a dry weather spell during the first six weeks they will need additional watering as the roots will

not have established sufficiently. Drought is a common cause of plugs dying. It might be useful to mark the location of plugs in grassland when they are being planted out to make extra care easy.

In grassland, the vegetation immediately surrounding the plugs should be kept short in the first year after planting out. This reduces the competition for the young plants enabling them to establish better.

Plugs are prone to slug and snail grazing, and seedlings are very susceptible to damage. Some form of control may be required to help them mature to a size where they are robust enough to survive.



© Somerset Wildlife Trust

Ongoing management of your mini-meadow

Meadows need looking after, and there is an annual management cycle that you will need to undertake. Cut down the vegetation between July-September each year after flowering. Put the cut grass into rows which are turned each day for around a week. This allows any seeds trapped in pods to fall onto the ground. Afterwards, remove and compost the cut vegetation. Leaving the cut material on the grassland will add nutrients to the soil, encouraging grasses at the expense of the wildflowers. This is hay-making at its most basic and can be a very fun activity for the local community to be involved in.

Farmer's meadows will then be grazed using livestock, usually cattle and/or sheep. The animals do several things:

- they eat the late summer/autumn vegetation re-growth, particularly grasses, enabling wildflower to grow with the grass;
- kick-up moss and dead leaves making small areas of bare ground in the grassland; and
- trample seeds into the soil helping them to germinate and root.

If livestock cannot be grazed on your wildflower area then you need to replicate this process manually. The easiest way of doing this is to rake the vegetation pulling out moss, dead leaves or cuttings missed during the mowing and hay-making. All of this material should be removed from the wildflower area and composted.



By following this process each year, your wildflower area should continue to bloom creating a colourful area of your garden, school ground or community.