

# FACT SHEET 6

## Meadows



**Meadows (or grasslands) refer to any grassy area which is open and not either growing crops such as wheat, or covered in trees or shrubs. You might be starting out with a playing field or village green, an area of rough 'waste land' or a field grazed by cows. They vary enormously in their existing conservation interest but all can be enhanced to provide a valuable habitat for plants and animals.**

Meadows are among the most diverse habitats in the British Isles. Very few habitats can boast such a rich tapestry of flora and fauna. Sadly, the swathes of wildflowers, home to numerous species of butterfly, grasshopper, invertebrate and bird are becoming less familiar due to modern farming practices. In the last fifty years, 95 per cent of our flower-rich meadows have been lost and many are still under threat.

The Gloucestershire Biodiversity Action Plan identifies sites with a wide range of wildflower species as being of importance in the county, such sites have declined nationally by over 97% in Gloucestershire.

The value of a site is assessed by the number of different species it supports, this includes everything from wildflowers to bees and butterflies. In general it can be assumed that the wider the variety of plant species, the wider the variety of other species also present.

### HOW TO FIND OUT WHAT YOU'VE GOT

The best way to do this is to undertake a survey or series of observations, let the grass grow without being cut, visit the site as often as possible and at different times of year, and record what you see. Although this can be a daunting task, a good field guide can help and there may be the opportunity to get a more formal survey undertaken by an ecological specialist.

You may find that there are already many species of plants growing, in which case check the 'How

to Manage Your Wildflower Meadow' section below. If you only find a few species such as buttercups, dandelions and daisies, then you can set about converting your grassy area into a new meadow by introducing some different flowers yourself.

### HOW TO IMPROVE IT?

It is important to make sure that you are using native, and where possible local, seeds or plants to create your meadow.

It is unlikely that simply scattering seed onto a grassy area will be successful as tiny seedlings will struggle to compete with existing grasses. The best thing to do is to make some gaps to give the seeds a chance. Remove sections of turf and topsoil and spread your chosen seed in the autumn. For local seed suppliers go to:

[www.floralocale.co.uk](http://www.floralocale.co.uk)

If you are planning on creating a large area and there are local wildflower meadows nearby,



why not see if you can either collect seed from these meadows or buy some seed rich hay from the farmer, this way you know that the species already grow locally and conditions on your site are going to suit them, giving a good chance of success. Always ask the permission of the landowner to collect seed.

Alternatively you can plant wildflower plugs which have already been grown in pots or trays. These should be planted into the turf in the autumn, and only a small area of turf needs to be removed to create the planting hole. This is generally a more expensive option, but can have a higher success rate.

## WHAT SPECIES TO CHOOSE? —

The species that will grow best are determined partly by the type of soil that you have. Most wildflower meadows grow on poor soils with low fertility and whilst some species will grow almost anywhere, others have specific requirements in terms of acidity and drainage. You can get simple soil testing kits from most garden centres to check the Ph of your soil, and checking local

road verges and existing meadows in your area will give a good idea of what is suited to the local conditions.

Traditional species of grass associated with meadows

BROWN BENT	CRESTED DOG'S-TAIL
FINE BENT	RED FESCUE
DOWNY OAT-GRASS	SHEEP'S FESCUE
MEADOW BARLEY	QUAKING GRASS
MEADOW FOXTAIL	SWEET VERNAL-GRASS

Traditional species of wild flowers associated with meadows:

NAME	FLOWERING PERIOD	SOIL TYPE
AUTUMN HAWKBIT	June to October	all
BIRD'S FOOT TREFOIL	June to September	all but acid
COWSLIP	March to May	basic
CUCKOO FLOWER	April to June	damp
OXEYE DAISY	May to September	fertile
BUGLE	April to June	damp
FIELD SCABIOUS	July to September	dry
LADY'S BEDSTRAW	July to August	all
LESSER STITCHWORT	May to August	acid



## HOW TO MANAGE YOUR WILDFLOWER MEADOW

Whether you have an existing wildflower meadow or whether you are creating one, the basics of management are the same. At the start of the growing season, i.e. March/April, the vegetation needs to be short, this allows the wildflowers and grasses to grow and flower during the spring and summer, then, once most things have flowered and set their seed, the meadow needs to be either cut or grazed until the vegetation is short again. If the meadow is cut the cut material (hay) needs to be removed. Leaving it in situ will smother seedlings and increase the nutrients and fertility of the soil, affecting the variety of plants which will thrive the following year.

## THE MEADOW MANAGEMENT CALENDAR

Jan	No action
Feb	No action
Mar	No action unless a mild winter has led to growth of grasses, in which case it might need mowing or a short period of grazing
Apr	Allow to grow and flower
May	Allow to grow and flower
June	Allow to grow and flower
July	Allow to grow and flower
Aug	Either cut and remove the hay or introduce grazing animals, if available
Sept	Graze with animals if available
Oct	Graze with animals if available
Nov	Graze and then remove animals – depending on how wet the ground is and how much has been eaten this could be earlier or later
Dec	No action

It is important not to cut the whole of your meadow every year, so that insects and small mammals have somewhere to shelter, the best way to achieve this is to leave a wide margin around the edge of the field, and then cut it on alternate sides each year.



## FURTHER READING

Pond Conservation have a series of fact sheets which give advice on creating or managing ponds for wildlife: [www.pondconservation.org.uk/](http://www.pondconservation.org.uk/)

The Pond Book, The Ponds Conservation Trust, 1999, ISBN 0953797104



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