Cotswold Seeds Ltd
The Cotswold Business Village
Moreton in Marsh,
Gloucestershire GL56 0JQ

Sowing & Growing: Establishing a Wildflower Meadow



Wildflower meadows are wonderful habitats for wildlife including insects, butterflies and pollinators but traditionally they take many, many years to develop, with flower and grass species increasing and diversity altering over time.

So it's important to remember that when creating a wildflower meadow on a new site, the plant species involved are generally slow growing, taking up to a year to properly establish and the balance of flower species will evolve over time. Some early pioneer species like wild carrot and red campion may appear in the first 12 months, while slower growing species like field scabious and cowslip may take 3 or 4 years to gain a foothold in the sward.

When to sow: Wildflowers should be sown in spring (late March - May) or late summer (August-September). Springtime is good as this gives the seeds the chance to establish throughout the rest of the year. However, sowing in autumn, when grass growth is slowing, means the flowers have a chance to come through, but may only be seen in the sward the following spring. Our Cornfield Annuals mixture can be sown onto bare soil in the autumn or spring. If sown in the spring it should be planted by May to get a good showing during the late spring and early summer of that year.

Sowing rate: Most wildflower and grass mixtures are sown at 2.5 grams per square metre or 10 kg per acre. Putting on more than this will mean the stronger species (grasses) may start to dominate. The low sowing rate of wildflower mixtures can make sowing areas by hand difficult, but the seed can be bulked out with a dry sand to ensure the whole area has been covered.

Seed Mixtures: Mixes are created to suit specific sites and choosing the right one is very important. If the area you wish to sow is chalk or limestone, acid or clay, damp or shady, then choose a mix created for those particular circumstances, otherwise a general purpose one is best, such as the Cotswold Wild Flora, which is a mixture of perennial grasses and wildflowers, along with a low rate of annual species for colour in the year of sowing.

Preparation Steps: It is important to control any weeds in the area to be sown before the seeds are broadcast. Problem weeds are docks, thistles and nettles as these cannot be removed easily once sowing has taken place..Planning several months ahead to clean up the area is therefore essential.

Weed control can be done one of two ways:

• Herbicide spray, usually a systemic herbicide like glyphosate (Roundup), which will kill any green material
on the area 7 - 10 days after applying the spray.
• Stale seedbed technique - prepare the seedbed as usual then wait a few weeks for weeds to germinate,

then cultivate again to destroy any weed seedlings.
• Once weeds have been dealt with, prepare a fine, well-worked seedbed. This may involve ploughing or
rotavating the site and cultivating it several times to work the soil down into a fine tilth.
• Firm up the seed bed by rolling or walking on the area before sowing. Small wildflower seeds do not like
a fluffy, spongy seed bed.
• The seed can be shallow drilled with agricultural machinery, broadcast with a spinner or sown by hand if
it is a smaller area.
• Once sown, harrow or rake the area to give it a light soil covering and to hide the seed from hungry birds.
• The area should then be well rolled to ensure the seeds are in good contact with the soil.

Managing a wildflower meadow: If left alone, a wild flower meadow will quickly return to scrub with the more competitive species taking over. Any wildflower meadow should be mown during its first season to control annual weeds. In the second year, let it flower before mowing. Timing for this will vary year to year, but is normally around August.

After mowing, remove the cuttings. This helps decrease the fertility of the soil so favouring delicate wildflowers rather than grasses. If you have very poor growth on thin soil, then cuttings can be left.

Preventing grasses from smothering the flowers

When choosing your mix, opt for fine, non-aggressive grasses. Exclude the more competitive grasses such as
ryegrasses, cocksfoot and agricultural forms of Timothy. Heavy, clay-rich or fertile soils will encourage grass growth, so meadows are most successful on lighter, drier, free-draining soils.

Coping with weeds: Perennial weeds should be removed or spot treated. Do not be afraid to top several times in the first year to control annual weed species, like charlock and fat hen.

Persistence: Once established wildflower meadows should be permanent and will improve with age.

Date Posted: 26th May 2023