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the importance of wild flower meadows

Posted in All Gardening Advice, August on 1st August 2018

THE DECLINE OF WILD MEADOWS

Almost all our meadows have now been sprayed and re-sown with more productive grasses to create more hay, with others turned over to arable. It's been estimated that by 1984, 97% of lowland semi-natural grassland had disappeared during the previous 50 years, with the surviving [meadows](#) now very fragmented and often degraded.

That is a terrible destruction for us – for the beauty and richness of our countryside – but it's a catastrophe for our native pollinators. They rely on these very plants for their life cycle, habitats and food, so it's not surprising that with this transformation of the British countryside, we've seen our pollinator numbers go into across-the-board declines.

POLLINATOR NUMBERS

As Dr Jeff Ollerton (expert pollination ecologist for Northampton University) told me while filming *Bees, Butterflies and Blooms*, we've already lost 23 bee species in England since 1800 – including 3 bumblebees – and in Britain 67% of our moth species have declined over the last 50 years, as well as 25% of our hoverflies. These trends are continuing downwards. If this carries on, as well as being a biodiversity disaster, our diet is going to look drastically different, with most of our fruit and vegetables – which are insect pollinated – gone from the supermarket shelves.

CREATING WILD FLOWER MEADOWS IN OUR GARDENS

So as well as introducing ever-increasing numbers of nectar-rich garden plants into our own private patches, it's important for as many of us as possible to find room for [a few native wild flowers](#). One way of doing so is by recreating [mini hay meadows](#), with all the flowers that go with them. I have done this at [Perch Hill](#) in a narrow strip of ground on the edge of my cutting garden.

I am lucky enough to live on a farm with plenty of room, but a patch a fraction of this space is still worth doing and I've seen wonderful wild flower combinations [growing in a decent sized pot](#). Choose the right selection of species – such as Cowslips, Ladies Bedstraw, Wild Marjoram, Field Scabious and Betony – and you'll have wild flowers in bloom in a neat succession from April until October, on whatever scale.

DO YOU REALLY LOVE YOUR LAWN?

... or does it need to be the size – mown short – that it is? We have decided to leave half our lawn in our own back garden to grow long and encourage wild flowers such as White and Red Clover to flower like billy-o. We like having a bit of the lawn short to lie on and play badminton, but the left-unmown bit looks much more varied and interesting.

There are pretty, delicate grasses like Crested Dog's Tail and Red Fescue, as well as an ever-increasing range of wild flowers, which I'm adding to with plug plants this autumn. These grasses don't form a solid monotonous colony, but mix up well with wild flowers. As soon as the sun comes out the place is alive with hoverflies and bees.

Remember too that wild flowers do not always have to be accompanied by grasses, as James Hitchmough,



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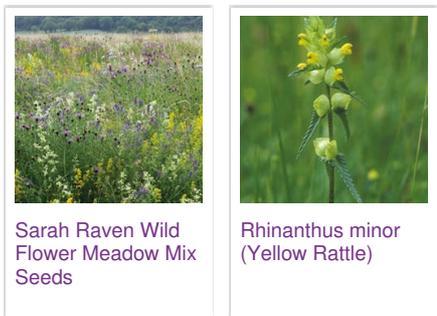
Professor of Horticultural Ecology at Sheffield University, showed us in his large scale planting over the Olympic site for 2013. He has created a meadow with a modern perennial prairie look and feel, not using echinaceas, Rudbekias and low-maintenance 'Meadow Perennials', but Spiny Restharrow, Betony, Field Scabious, Common Toadflax, Agrimony and many of our best wild flowers. In the Olympic meadows, these were planted cheek-by-jowel without a single grass mixed in.

Whatever system you use, make sure you choose the most garden-worthy wild flowers – species which flower for many weeks or months at a stretch and are rich in forage for that whole time.

Find out how to create your own meadows – with [native British wild flowers](#) or [exotic wild flowers](#) ...



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