

Mini Meadows



Dorset
Wildlife Trust

Wildlife-friendly gardening



MINI MEADOWS

Would you like a more exciting lawn? One full of flowers and insect life? This leaflet will help you choose which 'meadow' is right for you. Each option will need management but once you've got that right, it will give you year after year of pleasure!

GRASS-FREE LAWNS

As an alternative try a 'grass-free lawn'. Low growing, perennial, flowering plants are planted instead of grass. They will encourage more visits from pollinators and other invertebrates than wildflower meadows.

More flowers, less mowing and no chemicals. What could be better than that?



WHAT SORT OF MEADOW?

A tidy green setting for the borders? Or somewhere for children to play? A typical lawn with short grass gives this, but it doesn't need to be without low-growing flowers. Or, are you looking for a seasonal drift of tall flowers and grasses? This does mean leaving the grass long for several weeks.

Both types of lawn need mowing and the cuttings removed. You may be fortunate and already have some herbs in your turf, so have a good look at your grass before you start.

TOP TIPS FOR YOUR MEADOW

1 REDUCE FERTILITY

Reduce fertility and keep it that way. Soil that's too rich favours robust grasses and limits diversity of flowers.

2 GO CHEMICAL-FREE

Forget fertilisers or weed-killers! They will favour grass growth and only increase the frequency of mowing. Always remove cuttings after each mowing. These should be added to the compost heap.

3 DIVERSITY IS THE BEST POLICY

Mix it up! You can have a mix of lawn types, with a part left as a summer or annual meadow, with the rest as traditional lawn. If you have no lawn or space for a meadow, most of the plants can be grown in pots.

4 NON-NATIVES

In an annual meadow, several non-native annual flowers can also be very attractive to pollinators - phacelia, orlaya, ammi, cosmos, and annual grasses like greater quaking grass and foxtail barley for instance.

5 KNOW YOUR SOIL

Know your soil type: clay or sandy? Acid or alkali? This will help you choose the flower species that will do best.

POOR SOIL IS GOOD

Rich soil means fewer flowers as it favours grasses that out-compete the smaller, less dominant flowers.

Avoid feeding the lawn, as that increases grass growth and frequency of mowing, and always remove the cuttings.

If you have very vigorous or lush grass and want to convert to a flower meadow, first remove the turf. Stack this, cover the pile to keep out light and leave for some months to produce useable soil for beds. Sow seed of less competitive grasses and some flowers on your stripped patch or introduce plug plants once a basic turf is established.



SHORT GRASS

For the typical lawn, grass is kept mown, weekly or fortnightly depending on the amount of growth.

Many grassland plants live quite successfully in short grass. Rosette or creeping plants like clovers, self-heal, daisy, cat's-ear, mouse-eared hawkweed and dandelion can flower between mowings and are loved by insects.

Keep an eye out for rosettes in the grass and mow around selected plants, allowing them to flower. Resume cutting over the spot after a couple of weeks.

Additional suitable plants can be added as small 'plugs' if your existing grass isn't very flowery.



CUTTING TO BE KIND

Ignore the frequently heard advice to 'leave everything to flower and set seed'. If you wait until all flowers have set seed, the grass will become increasingly dominant and the flower diversity will rapidly decrease. And the longer you leave the growth, the harder it will be to cut it.

Most grassland plants are long-lived perennials and don't need to replace themselves each year by setting seed. Many are adapted to grazing and cutting by having a rosette form and can flower between cuts. Unless you have plants that only produce one flower spike in a season, like orchids, you can cut the sward in mid-summer, as in an old hay meadow, and you will probably have a later flowering, extending the colour and the season for pollinators.



LONG GRASS

The taller grass option - more like a traditional meadow - is to leave it for a couple of months and mow in late June or early July, according to season, growth, weather etc. It suits taller flowers like knapweeds, buttercups, ox-eye daisy, meadow cranesbill, vetches and scabious.

Once cut, always rake off and remove the cuttings, then bring the area back into your normal mowing schedule until the following spring. If your meadow has grown too tall for the mower, a scythe or strimmer is good for that first cut.

Yellow rattle is a semi-parasite on grasses, reducing the vigour of grass and so favouring other flowers. It is an annual so does need to seed each year and is therefore best in a meadow mown in summer. Allow the seed to fall once ripe - by early July.



Meadow buttercup
© Ken Dolbear MBE



Meadow crane's bill
© Ken Dolbear MBE



Yellow rattle
© Tony Bates MBE



Oxeye daisy
© Ken Dolbear MBE

ANNUAL MEADOW

There is another flowery option, often called an 'annual meadow' but more like a wild border, so not really a substitute for a grass lawn. Its nature is akin to a traditional cornfield. It will have little or no grass, instead having a dense burst of short-lived annuals like poppy, cornflower, corn marigold, corncockle, scentless mayweed and field pansy.

As in old-style cornfields, the soil needs to be disturbed each autumn by raking or light digging, so the plants can start again next year from the seed they have dropped. You could also use this as a start point for a typical meadow, gradually allowing grasses and perennial herbs to replace annuals.



Corncockle
© Richard Burkmar



Cornflowers
© Errin Skingsley



Corn marigolds and cornflowers
© Nicki Brunt



Wildflowers
© Errin Skingsley



Common poppy
© Ken Dolbear MBE

take ACTION

#WilderDorset

There are lots of ways to encourage wildlife in your garden. Plant flowers to attract pollinators, make a hedgehog doorway in your fence or simply create different habitats such as hedges, flowering trees or long grass. Large or small, your garden will be a stepping stone, helping wildlife to travel from place to place, to breed, feed and shelter.



Make space for nature in your green space and apply for your wildlife-friendly space plaque.

Visit dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk/gardenscheme to find out how to qualify.

DORSET WILDLIFE TRUST

Our mission is to create a 'Wilder Dorset' for people and wildlife. With the support of our 27,000 members, Dorset Wildlife Trust manages 42 nature reserves and four visitor centres. We look after Dorset's wildlife and wild places, restore habitats to make space for nature and inspire people to explore, enjoy and value the natural world.

Join us now to help protect Dorset's wildlife and wild places and make a real difference.



Our thanks to The Gardens Group for sponsoring this leaflet



The Gardens Group is made up of three garden centres, each as unique as the plants within them, located

in Sherborne (Castle Gardens), Yeovil (Brimsmore Gardens) and Poundbury (Poundbury Gardens). United by a commitment to green spaces and the wider community, The Gardens Group's team of experts includes indoor and outdoor plant enthusiasts, lepidopterists and wildlife warriors, all ready to inspire, educate and engage with gardeners of all ages and levels of expertise.

The garden centres are also home to three award-winning restaurants and a farm shop, built on people and place, as well as The Gardens Group's hugely popular and multi award-winning Christmas displays.

To find out more, go to www.thegardensgroup.co.uk.



Nature Recovery Dorset is a movement to make more, bigger, better and connected spaces for nature across Dorset. It has been collectively created to allow everyone in the county to join up to help nature recover.

Visit dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/nature-recovery to find out how to get involved.