



How to Grow Your Own Wildflower Garden to Encourage Invertebrates

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1. One thing to note when planning a wildflower grassland is that wildflowers like impoverished soils, so don't use plant feed or use compost on the ground and remove clippings after mowing or scything. Leaving the clippings on the ground for a couple of days before you clear them will allow seeds to drop. You may find that your ground is already rather fertile, but removing clippings with each mow will gradually lower fertility.
2. Where ground is more fertile, you might find that you get lots of species that spread aggressively such as Broad-Leaved Docks. It's a slow process to discourage the more aggressive species but by collecting clippings to reduce fertility, and cutting down those plants before they flower and seed, there will be a gradual improvement.
3. Everyone has their own ideas about what they want a garden to look like, but for wildlife it's important to ensure that you grow at least some plants that are native to your local area. The importance of native plants can't be stressed enough. Many invertebrates found in your local area will need local flora to breed.
4. Herbivorous larvae of some invertebrates are generalists and feed on many species of plant. However, there are many invertebrates, whose larvae are specialist feeders with much more specific needs. They will only feed on one or two plant species, and those plants are the only plants on which the adult female will lay eggs.
5. Often the adults are also quite specific in their preferences and will only nectar at certain plants, others will live on a specific plant species and feed on leaves, flowers or seeds. By providing as many native plant species as possible, you'll be helping to increase invertebrate populations, and this will have an impact all the way up the food chain.

6. You may be able to find online resources to see which native plants grow in your area, you can also look at local brownfield sites, road verges, meadows, dunes etc to see what grows there.
7. You can collect seeds from brownfield sites and road verges, ensuring that you leave plenty of seed behind. It's best to collect and sow the seeds as soon as they're ripe, imitating the natural processes, on bare or scarified ground, or in nutrient poor soil in a pot.
8. Many brownfield sites are being used for development nowadays and so it may be worth identifying local sites that are about to be developed and asking permission to take some of the native species from these sites before they're bulldozed.
9. Some seeds need the winter drop in temperatures or other natural conditions to induce germination, hence why sowing immediately after harvesting is preferable.
10. When looking for a supplier for plants or seed, always look for suppliers that don't use chemicals.
11. Beware of the 'pollinator friendly' claims of garden centres that you see on seed packets and plants. The seeds may not be organic, and the plants are usually not from organic seed. Plants are mostly often sprayed with chemicals as they are grown and consequently not pollinator friendly.
12. Look for a supplier that grows plants from UK seed or cuttings, and who grows the plants in the UK. Imported plants can inadvertently carry invasive invertebrate species or carry non-native pathogens. There are also often small genetic differences between the same plant species in different countries, so UK stock is best for invertebrates, it's what they've evolved alongside.
13. Buying plug plants is a cost-effective way to plant if you don't want to grow from seed. You may find that plug plants don't do well in areas that are already well established, such as lawns, but there is a way around that. Using a medium that has a small amount of fertility, you can pot on the plug plants, allowing them to become more established before finally planting out into the established areas.
14. Often when you stop mowing an area of grass, you'll get lots of surprises as wildflowers come up that you didn't plant or sow, from seeds that have laid dormant for years. These plants will mostly be local native species, although a few may be garden species spread by birds.
15. Yellow Rattle can be sown or planted in grassy areas to thin out the grasses. It should be sown around July when the seeds would naturally ripen on the plants. You can prepare an area of ground by scarifying and thinning the grass using a rake. You can scrape the grass away, but you should leave the roots as the Yellow Rattle needs grass roots to parasitise.
16. It's best for wildlife if you have a mosaic of habitats in the garden. Plants of different heights; trees, shrubs, hedges, grasses, herbaceous perennials, along with some self-seeding annuals.
17. Hedges, shrubs and trees can provide both a habitat and a food source for many invertebrates and will also provide feeding and nesting opportunities for birds. The bottoms of thick hedges are a particularly good habitat for small animals and allow them to make homes and move around safely. The vegetation around trees, shrubs and hedges, and a garden meadow or

lushly planted border, provides a safe exit from the hedges, shrubs and trees, a way to move around without being seen, and opportunities to hunt for invertebrates or feed on plants.

18. There are many debates about when to mow a garden meadow, but the late autumn is the best time for wildlife. It's the time when plants have all gone to seed and most hibernating small animals have gone from the vegetation. As a mosaic habitat is best for wildlife, it's best if you don't mow everywhere.
19. To ensure that areas left long don't become too fertile, it's best to mow in rotation, a different area each year. In a small garden you need only have two areas that you cut on alternate years. It's good for wildlife movement, and for protection from sight for animals that are hibernating, to also leave an area of longer vegetation around shrubs, hedges and trees.
20. It's best to mow with your mower on the highest setting and, most importantly, to gently beat the areas to be mown with a stick beforehand to move along any animals that might still be in there. Using a scythe is said to be preferable than mowing or strimming, but it isn't practical for everyone.
21. Ideally mow when it's dry and when it's forecast to be dry for a couple of days afterwards, you can then leave the clippings for a couple of days for seeds to drop before raking them together and removing them. If you have space, the clippings can be piled up somewhere in the garden, this provides yet another habitat for wildlife and hibernation. Snakes like a nice warm pile of rotting vegetation.
22. A good way to provide a different kind of habitat is to keep a short-mown path through the longer grassy areas, or to regularly mow a specific area of your grass. This can provide a great habitat for ground nesting bees, digger wasps etc and can provide a space for some smaller wildflower species to grow that would be outcompeted by the taller grasses and wildflowers.
23. If you want to plant a hedgerow, the same rules apply for sourcing plants. You're best with species that grow locally, and are UK sourced and grown. Young bare root plants are the most cost effective. They can be planted at around five plants per metre with a few of each of the species you want. They're usually available throughout the winter and should be planted then, while they're dormant.
24. Hedgerow species can be planted in two or three rows to achieve a thicker hedge, just stagger each row, so that you're planting in front of but also between the plants in the previous row.
25. Pruning hedgerows is a tricky one with so many species that have different requirements, and with many hedgerow species having fruits of some kind that feed our winter birds. The best suggestion I've seen is pruning on a three-year rotation. Pruning first one side of the hedge, then the top, then the other side of the hedge over the three years will ensure plenty of nesting opportunities, insect hibernation habitat etc. on the unpruned parts. This three-year rotation also means that the plants will always be able to flower and fruit, no matter which year's growth they flower on.
26. If you have space, prunings can be kept in a pile, as with clippings, and will provide a great habitat for invertebrates and small animals and for fungi to grow. If you're lucky you might get a hedgehog hibernating there, or indeed under your hedge. (My ex-mother-in-law, a lovely lady, had a hedgehog make a nest and hibernate under a large Camellia using leaves and twigs that had blown from the garden's trees 🥰)

27. To tidy or not to tidy – the latter, as it happens, is so much better for our wildlife. Whether you plan to create a garden meadow, or want to grow wildlife friendly borders, it's important to leave some habitat for wildlife in the winter. Dead plants are as important as live plants if you're an invertebrate looking for somewhere to hibernate.
 28. Insects often hibernate in dead flower heads and other small spaces on dead vegetation, or at the base of plants. Some invertebrates will have pupated at the base of plants or just below the soil surface. Mason bees will make nests in hollow stemmed plants. We mimic this when we make bee hotels.
 29. Bee hotels have problems that natural habitats don't, in that the high concentration of bees in such a small area often attracts unnaturally high numbers of their parasites. By providing natural nesting opportunities for bees, the bee population won't be disproportionately high in one small area and won't attract as many parasitic species.
 30. If you can, leave the stems, leaves and flower heads of dead plants in borders until most invertebrates emerge from hibernation in warm spring weather. Even better, wait until both the male and female mason wasps have emerged and are seen in the garden. Best of all would be to leave them in place to decay naturally, most plants fall over and the new growth in spring soon hides them.
 31. As they decay, they provide yet another habitat for invertebrates to live in, and a food source for those that feed on decaying matter, all while fertilising your borders. By leaving dead plants you're also providing a place for birds to hunt for invertebrates in winter, providing the birds with protein, and an area for wildlife to move around unseen.
 32. The unmown areas in your garden meadows will do the same job as an untidied border and provide food, hibernation spots and habitat.
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