

Marc's List of Wild Flowers for the Garden

Aren't they weeds?

In ecological terms, 'weeds' are simply opportunists, colonisers that quickly invade disturbed ground. That's why they love gardens and other cultivated or disturbed land. The invasive weeds of cultivation such as Ground Elder, Goosegrass, White Bindweed, Docks, Stinging Nettle and Creeping Buttercup all thrive on high fertility and a regularly disturbed soil. In some situations, garden escapes such as Canadian Goldenrod, Horseradish, and Green Alkanet (*Pentaglottis*) are also weeds. We remove these invasive species from our garden. I am not proposing that gardeners should cultivate these, as they can soon take over. I am talking about other wildflowers, which are non-invasive and most of which prefer poor soils.

Why grow wild flowers in gardens?

- Lots of them are attractive

Maybe in a quiet way, but do we always want a 'riot' of colour? Wild flowers have a simple beauty that is evocative of water meadows, flowering hedgerows and flower-spangled turf on downs and sea cliffs. All these are peaceful, calming places that stressed-up city gardeners love to visit. Why not replicate some of that in your garden?

There is plenty of scope for combining wild plants and cultivated plants in new and creative ways – so far, British gardeners have barely started to explore this potential. So now's your chance...

- They are very easy to grow

Few problems with hardiness, pests or diseases, or slugs, and most actually prefer relatively poor soil. The only thing that you have to pay attention to is matching the right plants to your conditions. Damp-loving plants for damp soil, drought-tolerating plants for drier soils.

- Wildlife (especially Insects) enjoys them

Many adult moths, butterflies, bees, flies and beetles eat either nectar, or pollen, or both. These various creatures have different shapes and sizes of mouth parts, adapted to different wild flowers. Some can use exotic garden flowers very readily. Others can't. It has been my experience that a selection of wild flowers in a garden will encourage a good range of beneficial insects.

Diversity leads to stability

The greater the range of wild insects living in the garden, the more diverse and stable are the food chains which build up, the more birds you will get, and the less likely is it that you will be plagued with so-called garden pests. It's natural pest control. This is what biodiversity is all about...

Some recommended wild flowers for the garden:

Here is a list of some of my favourite wild species that are of value to a broad range of insects. Ideally plant in groups of the same species so that pollinators are more likely to notice them from a distance. I have extended my definition of wild flower to include two smallish flowering trees:

Wild Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*). A well-known culinary herb. Excellent nectar source for butterflies. You can use the leaves in cooking. A small herbaceous perennial, very easy to grow in a dry, sunny position, winter leaves form a ground covering mat. Does not like shade.

Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*). A tall biennial, has ferny foliage and typical 'umbellifer' flower heads in summer. Likes dry stony soil. A very important source of pollen or nectar for many flower beetles, hoverflies, and other invertebrates.

Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*). Another biennial umbellifer, this time preferring damp and heavy soil and will grow in semi-shade. Likes clay. Has umbels of greenish white flowers. There are selected garden forms (just as good for wildlife) with mahogany leaves and a pinkish tinge to the flowers. Culinary angelica (*Angelica archangelica*) from Northern Europe is much taller, and prefers dry and sunny situations; its flowers also attract lots of insects.

Greater Knapweed (*Centaurea scabiosa*). A medium to tall perennial, with attractive cut leaves, needs an open sunny situation and a well drained soil. Looks excellent in a herbaceous border, and should be in every garden. Has very attractive purple flowers from mid to late summer. A magnet for all sorts of bees and butterflies, and goldfinches will eat the seeds in winter.

Hemp Agrimony (*Eupatorium Cannabinum*). Another tall perennial, flowering late summer, and requiring damp or wet soil. Very good nectar plant for butterflies. Avoid the double flowered variety (*flore pleno*) sold in the nursery trade, as this has no nectar. The even taller North American counterpart *E. purpureum* looks very similar, but *E. cannabinum* seems to attract more butterflies.

Field Scabious (*Knautia arvensis*) and **Small Scabious** (*Scabiosa columbaria*). Both perennials, the first tall, the second shorter. Both require open sunny positions, and the Small Scabious likes a calcareous soil. Both are very good nectar plants for butterflies.

Devil's Bit Scabious (*Succisia pratensis*) prefers damp and heavy soils, will grow in grass and looks good there, e.g, in a late-summer meadow which is mown at other times of the year. An excellent late nectar source for bumblebees and butterflies.

Teasels (*Dipsacus fullonum*, *Dipsacus pilosus*). Attractive to bees and butterflies, and the dry seedheads, so long as they are left throughout winter, will attract small groups of goldfinches – beautiful small birds marked in yellow, black and scarlet. Teasels are biennials which seed themselves without being invasive – I just move the young plants in winter if they are growing in an inconvenient place. They like damp soil and will do well in heavy clay, and can hold their own in rough grass. As well as the tall *D. fullonum*, there is an attractive smaller variety, *Dipsacus pilosus*, which grows in fens in the East of England. Its hard to obtain at present from suppliers of wild plants or seeds, but the more customers that enquire about it, the more likely it is that they will stock it. There is also a perennial form from central Europe, *D. inermis*.

Viper's Bugloss (*Echium vulgare*). A biennial, needing a sunny position and well-drained soil. Spikes of deep blue flowers, a treat for bumblebees. A very attractive garden plant, looks good on its own, in grass, or in a herbaceous border. Contrasts well with other flowers in spikes, such as *Verbascums* or *Digitalis*. There are various other *Echium* species from around Europe and the Canaries, most of which seem very attractive to bees, but some are not so easy to grow and keep going. *E. vulgare* is easy to grow and will seed itself so long as it has well-drained sunny soil, preferably calcareous.

Bird's foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) A low growing perennial that does best in poor, well drained soil in sun. Attractive to bees and to blue butterflies – seems to attract Common Blues like a magnet. Will grow in a patchy, starved lawn, if you are lucky enough to have such a thing. Otherwise in a sandy or gravelly place, perhaps in old builders' rubble. or in a dry wall. In shady or over-fertile situations it tends to become leafy and does not flower so profusely. In damp places you can grow the Marsh Bird's foot trefoil (*Lotus uliginosus*) instead.

Lawn flowers If you have a lawn, leave part of it unmown in midsummer to allow Self-heal (*Prunella*) and Hawkweeds and Hawkbits (*Hieracums*) to flower. A lot of insects visit them, especially hoverflies.

Two small trees:

Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna* and *C. oxyacantha*). Grow the single white-flowered type (not the double-flowered 'Paul's Scarlet'). As well as being a pollen and nectar source, birds eat the fruit, and the dense thorny nature of this small tree provides good cover where birds can hide from cats. One of the best trees you can plant in a garden. Slow growing at first, but catches up after a few years.

Goat Willow or Pussy Willow (*Salix caprea*). Early flowering, it is an important early food source for bumble bees and other insects. Also many insect larvae use the leaves as a food. Plants are either male or female. Females produce showier flowers, but do not produce pollen. Both males and females do produce nectar, apparently. Likes damp soil. Easy to grow from cuttings, can be coppiced to keep it as a bush if space is limited. In country areas you see various hybrids between this and a host of other wild willows, difficult to identify, but all having similar value for wildlife.

This is one instance where I personally think the wild willows (often disparaged as 'weeds' or 'scrub') have more aesthetic value than the motley band of willows available in garden centres, which either look utterly bizarre (*Salix contorta* and *S. caprea pendula*) or grow huge and will wreck the foundations of your house (*Salix pendula*, the weeping willow).

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