

Lavant Horticultural Society

“Wildflower Meadows” **Michael Joseph** 8th September 2021

Just some notes on Michael's talk that are by no means comprehensive.

Meadows, with their wildflowers, were the way of producing hay to feed animals over winter and covered large areas of the countryside.

98% of meadows have now been lost, much supplanted by pasture, made up of much more vigorous grasses that are cut for silage rather than hay. The nutrient-rich soil does not favour wildflowers, which would anyway be overwhelmed by the more vigorous pasture grasses. The earlier cutting time of the silage (May, with the possibility of a second later silage cut) would not allow wildflowers to mature, nor the invertebrates that would populate a meadow.

Meadows are allowed to grow before being cut at the end July or beginning of August. Traditionally this would have been done by scythe. Very small meadows could be cut with a trimmer and larger ones with a mechanical scythe, with very large ones requiring farm machinery.

The exact timing of the cut is determined by the weather. It can be delayed to allow later flowering species to flower – in this respect parts of the meadow can be cut at various later times to give the opportunity to as wide a range of wildflowers as possible to flower.

After cutting it is made into hay, by being left out and turned to dry, shedding its seed and invertebrates, before being baled up and removed (unless it is being used to create new meadows).

After this, the meadow would be grazed over winter. In the absence of livestock, this can be done with a mower, but it is essential to collect up and remove the cuttings. Otherwise they will rot down and make the soil too nutrient-rich for the wildflowers.

Grazing (or mowing) should be stopping in February to allow the meadow to grow on, starting the cycle again.

Once established, wildflower meadows are relatively easy to manage. However, care needs to be taken to remove any grasses that may infiltrate the edges from adjacent pasture.

A meadow will attract a vast variety of invertebrates, some of which are extremely small, all of which are important, even the smallest. They not only eat the meadow plants, but also each other and serve as the basis of a whole food chain, going up, as an example, through amphibians, then grass snakes, then herons.

Meadows make a significant contribution to biodiversity, not only with their wildflowers and the huge number of invertebrates that live in them, but also all the way up this food chain.

There are several ways of starting a wildflower meadow:

- Seed – be careful to source the seed from reliable sources, such as [Emorsgate Seeds](#), as some “wildflower seed” that is being sold comes from places like China. It is essential that the seed be of native species, the more local the source, the better.
- Strew – the cuttings from an existing meadow are strewn on the bare soil of the new location, bringing not only the seed, but also its population of invertebrates.

- Plugs – meadow wildflowers and grasses in the form of small plants, to give them a head's start.
- Strip – achieve the low-nutrient soil with a lack of more vigorous competition by stripping back existing grass, removing the top couple of inches with the thatch and roots.

The best time to sow is when the seed would naturally fall, i.e. in autumn.

Yellow rattle is very useful to wildflower establishment by reducing the vigour of grasses, as it is semi-parasitic on their roots. However, yellow rattle must be sown in autumn; its seed needs vernalisation –exposure to the cold of winter – in order to become viable and will not germinate if sown in spring.

There is now a wider appreciation of the value of wildflower meadows and the need to halt their decline and reverse it. Michael mentioned the [Coronation Meadows](#) initiative.

Michael answered a question about the lack of poppies in the pictures of meadows that he had shown. The poppy is not a meadow flower, but a cornfield annual, together with cornflower, corn camomile, corn marigold and corn cockle (the last needed to be eliminated from fields of cereals in case its poisonous seeds might contaminate flour made from the grain).

Meadow wildflowers, by contrast, are perennials, with the exception of yellow rattle, which grows anew every year from the fallen seed.