

### 1 Field of dreams

A great flickering mass of corn marigolds, knapweed and poppies: this is what we all have in the back of our minds when we imagine meadows: romantic, drop-dead gorgeous, colourful and waving gently in a warm breeze. This one is at the Old Vicarage, East Ruston, a garden that is well worth the trek to Norfolk.



1

1 GAP PHOTOS / JONATHAN BUCKLEY. DESIGN: ALAN GRAY AND GRAHAM ROBESON



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## Pastures new

Nothing beats the romance of a beautiful meadow, as countless poets, scriptwriters and even chocolate manufacturers will testify. But it's notoriously difficult to create one yourself

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2

### 2 Into the long grass

This is something that can be achieved in all but the smallest gardens just by letting some of the lawn grow long and peppering it with flowers. The contrast between wild and mown is always inviting.

### 3 Spice it up

*Pilosella aurantiaca* – aka fox and cubs, hen and chickens or devil's paintbrush – brings a welcome zing of orange into a wild planting. It's not strictly speaking a native wild flower, but no-one is saying that meadows have to be either wild or native.



3

2 GAP PHOTOS / JULIETTE WADE. 3 & 4 GAP PHOTOS / JONATHAN BUCKLEY



4

### 4 Gold dust

This is one of my favourite sights in early summer: a field spattered yellow with buttercups. For 20-odd years we lived next to just such a field (albeit not quite as pretty as these ones in Wensleydale with their tumbling barns and misty horizons) and it was always a pleasure to look at and to walk through. Your trouser legs would be dusted with yellow pollen and dew-pasted petals would stick to your boots. This field buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*) is more elegant than the creeping *Ranunculus repens*.

Everybody loves the romantic idea of a meadow – running freely through long grasses and waving cornfield flora, possibly wearing a loose shift of broderie anglaise, before throwing yourself down in a field and chewing on a grassy stem while watching grasshoppers hop and crickets chirp. Perhaps in the distance you can see the weary (though ruggedly handsome) farmhand plodding home with scythe on shoulder and empty cider flaggon bumping against his moleskinned hip. Sounds marvellous, doesn't it? However, it is no simple matter to recreate a meadow – it's a bit like an episode of *Game of Thrones*. There will be death, love, storms, betrayal, disappointment, triumph, surprise, accidents, reunions and a great deal of sex.

I don't want to put you off too much, but it is important that you are under no illusions – scattering packets of optimistically labelled

wildflower seeds on your lawn will not cut the mustard. Meadows require a fair bit of sweat. The first thing to understand is that good soil is your enemy: for millennia, mankind has been taught to improve the quality of the soil by heaping it with lovingly crafted compost and the combined manures of every available animal – from medieval night soil to mountains of Ecuadorian guano. For wildflowers, the opposite is the case as they thrive in horrible soil – ideally consisting of equal parts old rubble and dust. This is because your enemy is grass, which, given the slightest encouragement, will quickly dominate and smother all those delicate cornfield flowers and all of your dreams will come to nothing more than a tussocky paddock. Grass can be controlled a bit by establishing a miraculous plant called yellow rattle, which will gorge itself on the roots of grasses and keep things down a bit, but you will still have to

### 5 Pollinators' paradise

This meadow was planted in Sussex by the very clever designer, Ian Kitson. It rolls beautifully away from the house and links the garden with the wilder surrounding woods and downland. Look carefully and you will see phacelias among the poppies and cornflowers – this is irresistible to bees as well as being an excellent green manure.



5

### 6 Fading beauty

By August, the first sheen has gone from a meadow – the grass is more brown than green, and the early flowers have succumbed to wind and rain. However, we still have wild carrot (*Daucus carota*), plantains, knapweed and *Knautia arvensis* (the field scabious).



6

### 7 A nod to tradition

This is, I think, one of the seven wonders of British horticulture. In spring, the wet banks between the River Churn and the River Thames near Cricklade are a place of pilgrimage to those of us who revel in the checkerboard glory of the snake's head fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*). There are thousands of them that have been left to their own devices for more than a century.



7

5 GAP PHOTOS / ABIGAIL REX, DESIGN: IAN KITSON; 6 GAP PHOTOS / ROBERT MABIC; 7 JONATHAN BUCKLEY



8

8 GAP PHOTOS / ROBERT MABIC

### 8 Crowning glory

This is the sort of thing you are likely to see in a healthy and well-managed meadow. It is not an easy thing to establish and maintain, but, if you have the time and the tenacity, it is a glorious thing. The flowers shown are (from left) *Knautia arvensis*, *Salvia pratensis*, *Leucanthemum vulgare* (ox-eye daisy) and *Geranium phaeum*.

#### Further reading

- **Sowing Beauty** by James Hitchmough (Timber Press, 2017).
- **Making a Wildflower Meadow** by Pam Lewis (Frances Lincoln, 2015).
- **Meadows at Great Dixter and Beyond** by Christopher Lloyd (Pimpernel Press, 2016).
- **RHS Companion to Wildlife Gardening** by Chris Baines (Frances Lincoln, 2016).

#### Sowing your own

- Pictorial Meadows has a good range of annual and perennial seeds. [pictorialmeadows.co.uk](http://pictorialmeadows.co.uk)
- Try Emorsgate Seeds if you need something site-specific. [wildseed.co.uk](http://wildseed.co.uk)
- An easier option is to use wildflower turf (but you still need to get rid of perennial weeds). Try Lindum, [turf.co.uk](http://turf.co.uk), or Wildflower Turf, [wildflowerturf.co.uk](http://wildflowerturf.co.uk)

▷ spend time weeding for the first few years. You have been warned. The smaller the area, the easier it is to achieve your goal: if you are just thinking about converting a front garden, it may be sensible to invest in some wildflower turf, which saves a lot of time and effort. Of course, not all meadows are wildflower meadows: there are damp fritillary meadows, orchid meadows, simple grassy meadows and surprise meadows – one of my client's lawns miraculously revealed itself to be a cowslip meadow this spring. You can create an annual meadow very easily – sow the seed in April and by mid-June you will have something spectacular that will carry on giving until the autumn. The downside is that you will have to do the same thing again next year. Another suggestion is to inject essence of meadow into your borders by upping the percentage of ornamental grasses and using herbaceous plants that emulate the wildflower –

for example, foxgloves, verbascums, achilleas, veronicastrums, thalictrums or geraniums. I made a Chelsea Garden along these lines many years ago using a matrix of ornamental grasses (in that case *Anemanthele lessoniana* – which, in those days, was called *Stipa arundinacea*). It was not even slightly wild, but was meadowy in feel. A failsafe option, which may not carry the same poetic heft but will still look fabulous, is a spring meadow using bulbs – starting with crocuses and progressing steadily through narcissi, tulips, camassias and alliums. This will get you through from about February until the end of June, which is not bad. After that, you will have to put up with some scruffy grass for a while before knocking it all back in September and starting all over again. If you drop a fruit tree or two into the mix as well, you can add a bit of height – as well as some blossom (the very best of which is quince blossom, as

delicate as the ears of fairy queens) – with the obvious advantage of having a decent autumn harvest. But if you want the real thing, you have my admiration and cheers of encouragement. You need to persevere: once the soil is prepared, find yourself a really good seed merchant and explain your situation exactly – the soil make-up, the pH measure, and the sunshine and moisture levels. A good supplier will advise you on what will actually grow and thrive rather than make you gnash your teeth in frustration. But remember, suppliers aren't miracle workers; you will still have to do the weeding. The good news is that, if you stick with it, you will be rewarded with something so romantic and gorgeous that as the setting sun dances through the waving grasses you will feel that you have been transported to a 1970s Flake advertisement: 'Only the crumbliest, flakiest chocolate...'

#### Places to visit

- Cricklade North Meadow, north Wiltshire. This National Nature Reserve is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and boasts the largest population of snake's head fritillaries in the UK. [crickladeinbloom.co.uk/north\\_meadow.html](http://crickladeinbloom.co.uk/north_meadow.html)
- Clattinger Farm Nature Reserve, Wiltshire. This lowland grassland, opened by Prince Charles in 1997, features meadow saffron, tubular water-dropwort, orchids and downy-fruited sedge. The hay is cut after the flowers have seeded. [wiltshirewildlife.org](http://wiltshirewildlife.org)
- Runnymede was the site of the signing of the Magna Carta. It is now run by the National Trust and the riverside meadows play host to a wide range of wildflowers. [nationaltrust.org.uk/runnymede](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/runnymede)