



On the Wild Side

Designer James Scott explores the diversity of wildflowers and their significance within green spaces

Wildflower meadows and meadow-style planting are becoming an increasingly prominent feature in contemporary landscape design, valued for their naturalistic beauty, biodiversity benefits and opportunity to replace low-value lawn. As their popularity has grown, so too has the range of ways in which meadows can be created.

Over years of designing and delivering meadow schemes – particularly in the Chilterns, where The Garden Company is based – I have seen first-hand how different approaches perform in real landscapes. While the visual intent may be similar, the method of establishment has a real impact on outcomes.

Despite their widespread use, there remains confusion between wildflower landscape turf products and traditionally sown wildflower meadows. For designers and landscapers, understanding this distinction is important, as the two behave very differently on site. Choosing the right approach underpins reliable performance and successful design outcomes.



Image ©The Garden Company

Traditionally sown wildflower meadows are established from seed, involving lower upfront cost, longer establishment times and greater variability in early years, particularly on challenging sites.

Wildflower landscape turf, by contrast, is pre-grown and installed as a finished surface, offering immediate visual impact, known species composition and more predictable establishment. Both approaches have their place, but turf is often favoured for speed of establishment and early impact.

A common misunderstanding lies in the term *wildflower* itself. Wildflowers are often assumed to be native plants, but botanically this is not always so. A wildflower is simply a plant that occurs naturally in the wild somewhere – not necessarily in the UK.

Importantly, plants do not need to be native to provide biodiversity benefits; pollinators respond to nectar, pollen and habitat structure, not national boundaries! A wildflower landscape turf product is a pre-grown mat of wildflowers, often – though not always – combined with grasses. In practice, ‘wildflower turf’ covers a wide range of mixes, species compositions and design intentions. This diversity is both a strength and a challenge, particularly where assumptions about native planting and biodiversity persist.

Wildflower landscape turf products may include native species, non-native species that are highly valuable to wildlife, and, in some cases, cultivars selected for traits such as vigour or flowering reliability. Plant nomenclature is helpful here.

A straight species (for example, *Achillea millefolium*) refers to a naturally occurring

plant type rather than a horticultural selection. While straight species are native somewhere in the world, they are not necessarily native to the UK.

A plant with a cultivar name in quotation marks – for example, *Achillea millefolium* ‘Cerise Queen’ – or described as a hybrid is a horticultural selection. Cultivars are bred or selected for predictable traits such as flower colour, height or flowering performance.

In the UK, a *native* plant is generally defined as one present since the end of the last Ice Age, around 10,000 years ago. This results in a relatively limited native flora – commonly cited at around 1,300–1,400 species. By contrast, Australia, where there wasn’t an Ice Age, has approx. 800 different species of Eucalyptus!

“Wildflowers are often assumed to be native plants, but botanically this is not always so”

There is also an important intermediate category: naturalised species, which were introduced historically but have since formed self-sustaining wild populations.

This broader context is critical when planning a wildflower meadow. Ecological value is influenced not only by whether a plant is strictly native, but by how effectively it functions within a given landscape.

Choosing between turf and a seeded meadow

Establishing a successful seeded wildflower meadow requires specialist knowledge, careful soil preparation and long-term management.

Historic weed seedbanks must be addressed; selective herbicides cannot be used once the meadow is establishing; sowing rates are critical; and careful cutting regimes are needed for several years to prevent grasses becoming dominant.

Image ©The Garden Company



A seeded meadow can take two to three seasons to reach its intended balance.

Wildflower turf removes much of this uncertainty. The pre-grown mat suppresses residual weed germination, the balance of grasses and flowers is already established, and soil preparation is similar to that used for conventional lawn turf.

Early-stage maintenance is also reduced; while turf requires consistent watering during establishment, it generally demands far less intervention in the first 12–18 months. For many projects, these features are invaluable.

Design flexibility

The range of wildflower landscape turf products now available offers significant design flexibility. One of our key suppliers, James Hewitson-Brown of Wildflower Turf Company, has been a pioneer in this area. Understanding site conditions is essential when choosing mixes, which may be grass-free or grass-inclusive, native-only or blended, and suited to shade, dry soils or specific geological contexts. Purpose-made mixes can also reinforce local character.

At The Garden Company, we often favour native mixes when working in rural areas of the Chilterns, while our urban projects allow for a broader palette. Given the UK's limited native flora, suppliers may incorporate non-native or naturalised species to extend flowering seasons and increase visual impact.

Plant knowledge remains important, as some species may need to be introduced separately or require

time for soil conditions to support them. Bulbs for instance are a great addition to the mix. They can be planted under the turf if it is being laid in the autumn, or added later.

Residential and commercial drivers

In residential projects, wildflower turf appeals to clients seeking naturalistic landscapes with early results – softer, more ecological spaces without years of waiting. In commercial and public schemes, additional drivers include biodiversity net gain targets and sustainability frameworks such as BREEAM, where measurable ecological value is often a specification requirement.

Specifying wildflower landscape turf should be approached with the same rigour as any planting decision. When chosen thoughtfully, these products offer designers and landscapers a powerful tool – balancing ecology with aesthetics.



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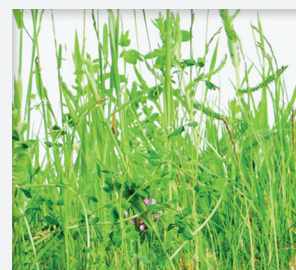
James Scott FSGLD MBALI founded The Garden Company in 1991. As managing director and principal designer, he oversees all projects and has led the company to win multiple national awards for both design excellence and landscaping craftsmanship. With a strong focus on sustainability, Scott is dedicated to creating places that celebrate nature – where people love to spend time and that contribute to their wellbeing. He is an Accreditor for the Society of Garden and Landscape Designers and serves on the judging panel for both the SGLD and Pro Landscaper Project Awards.
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GO Wild



James Scott's top five tips for incorporating wildflowers into your next project



Choose the turf mix as carefully as any planting scheme

Not all wildflower turf products suit every site. Avoid selecting mixes based on flowers alone – sun levels, soil moisture, exposure and maintenance must all be considered along with the wider setting.



Use wildflower turf strategically within the design

Wildflower turf is most effective when used with intent: softening edges, framing formal spaces, replacing low-value lawn or linking planting areas. Mown margins and meadow shrubs help maintain clarity.



Layer in bulbs to extend seasonal interest

Planting bulbs alongside turf adds structure and early-season impact. Species such as alliums, *Narcissus* ('Pheasant's eye' is a personal favourite), bluebells, *Fritillaria meleagris* and *Camassia* integrate well and extend flowering.



Design with aftercare in mind

Most wildflower turfs benefit from one to two cuts per year – timed to allow flowering and seed set. Cuttings should be removed to prevent soil enrichment and excessive grass growth.



Create mown routes to invite interaction

Mown pathways add visual interest and encourage engagement, helping meadow areas feel accessible rather than off-limits.