

How to: Make a lawn more wildlife-friendly



At its simplest a very easy way to help garden wildlife, which you can take a lot further with long grass patches and plant-plugs – but this can take time and patience!



Photo: Tom Corser www.tomcorser.com Wikimedia Commons



Photo: Steve Head

It's a [myth](#) that mown lawns can't support a lot of plant species, and they can be *quite* good for wildlife, but there is much you can do to turn a stripy close-mown lawn into something better! It is all about letting grass grow a bit (or a lot) longer and allowing more species of wildflowers and bulbs to flourish and flower, without making it unattractive or stopping other uses, and this will bring in lots of insects and other creatures.

Target species – plants

(See our web pages on [lawn](#) and [long grass](#) flowers)

- Spring bulbs like crocus and snowdrops in conventional lawns
- In slightly longer grass lawns: daisy, cowslip, birds-foot trefoil, clover
- In long grass: oxeye daisy, knapweed, mullein, cranes-



Photo: By Andreas Eichler, Wikimedia commons

Target species - animals

(see our [wildlife web pages](#))

- Butterflies: meadow brown, gatekeeper, speckled wood, ringlet, common blue
- Bees and other pollinators
- Lots of beetles, bugs and other insects
- Frogs and toads
- Field mice, voles and shrews



Photo: Mike Pennington Baltasound

How to do it?

We suggest three levels you can try:

1. Plant spring bulbs such as crocus, snowdrops, grape hyacinths and snakes-head fritillary into the lawn - see the RHS advice in further information below. Daffodils are also popular but not very useful for pollinators.



Photo: Janet Quested

2. Allow patches (or all!) of your lawn to grow a bit longer by setting the mower blades to cut at about 5cm. This is enough to let buttercups, clover and daisies flower and so help insects. Other wildflower species (such as those listed on our [lawn flower](#) page) can be introduced as plug plants



Photo: J M Staines

3. Allow areas of your lawn to grow *really long* so that the grass can flower. This will help some butterflies and moths. You can then establish a different set of meadow wild plants grown on from plugs or seed; see our [meadow flowers](#) page.



Photo: J M Staines

How easy is it to do?

- It is very easy to plant spring bulbs or let the grass grow a bit longer!
- It is quite easy to add species to 5cm mown grass lawns, but you may have to keep trying

- It is very easy to let lawn grass grow very long, but it can be quite difficult to get lots of new flowering plants to grow there, and you should see it as a long term (2-3 year) project.

How much will it cost?

- Letting grass grow longer is free!
- Commercial garden spring bulbs can be very cheap – 10-20p per bulb in bulk purchase
- Wildflower plant plugs cost about £1 each, so it depends on how big a patch and how many species. Best to start with a small area and a few species so about £25
- Sowing seeds into lawns doesn't work well, but you can sow in trays and plant them out like plugs when mature. This will be a cheap option.

How effective is it?

- Letting grass grow a bit longer is very effective in letting established plants like clover and daisies flower.
- Planting spring bulbs in lawns is very effective, and so are plug plants once they are established in short or long grass.
- The “brown” butterflies feed on grass so they benefit from long grass immediately.
- Getting plants established in grass on fertile ground isn't easy, and you might consider alternatives – see below.



Beautiful flower-rich lawn at the Thomas Jollyffe Primary School in Stratford-upon-Avon

Photo: Judith Conroy

Golden rules – what the science tells us

- Setting the mower high to leave grass about 5cm long allows other plants to flower
- When planting wildflower plugs, cut the grass right down around them and leave a bare soil gap so they can get started without competition
- Letting grass grow fully and flower is very good for brown butterflies and lots of other wildlife but doesn't help most pollinators

- Longer grass can look ragged and untidy, so cut paths through it and mow a tidy 1m border around the patch - then it looks “meant”
- If your lawn is very fertile, long grass is too competitive and you will have difficulty establishing flowering meadow plants. Consider letting the grass grow long and planting your wildflowers in a flower bed – 100% success guaranteed!
- Stop fertilising your lawn, and **never** use selective weed killer!
- Sowing yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor* helps suppress grass growth, but it doesn’t survive mowing or trampling

What to look for?

Bulbs will give you a beautiful swathe of colour in the spring and die back leaving a clean lawn for the summer. Grass cut to 5cm long allows flowers to bloom and attract bees and butterflies. Very long grass will attract breeding brown butterflies, and when you have wildflowers established you will see lots of pollinating insects. There will be lots of beetles and spiders near the roots if you look for them.

Things to be aware of

- Several lawn “weeds” like buttercups, dandelion, plantain and ragwort are excellent for wildlife so let them flourish!
- If you want to create a “real meadow” where wildflowers and grass are in equilibrium you may need to start from scratch removing the turf and topsoil
- It can be an uphill struggle to get flowers (not bulbs) established in a fertile lawn
- Lawns are important for garden design, and for children playing, so be clear which areas can be set aside for wildlife, and where you need to leave paths



Photo: Celia Monks

Further information

- How-to: Create and maintain a [wildflower meadow](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_meadow.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_meadow.pdf

On our website

Wild [plants for lawns](http://www.wlgf.org/wildlife/lawn_flowers.html) www.wlgf.org/wildlife/lawn_flowers.html

Wild [plants for meadows](http://www.wlgf.org/wildlife/meadow_flowers.html) www.wlgf.org/wildlife/meadow_flowers.html

[Yellow rattle](http://www.wlgf.org/wildlife/rhinanthus.html) page www.wlgf.org/wildlife/rhinanthus.html

[Lawn myths](http://www.wlgf.org/lawns_myths.html) www.wlgf.org/lawns_myths.html

[Fertility myths](http://www.wlgf.org/myth_fertility.html) www.wlgf.org/myth_fertility.html

RHS [Planting bulbs](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/how-to-plant-bulbs-in-grass) in grass www.rhs.org.uk/advice/how-to-plant-bulbs-in-grass

RHS Wildflower [meadow maintenance](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=446) www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=446