

What is a wildflower?

By Ken Thompson



If as a gardener you buy wildflower plants or seeds, what do you expect to get? To be more specific, would you expect such plants to be British natives, and would you be disappointed if they weren't? Does a "wildflower" have to be native, or can it be any plant growing without human assistance?

We can't get much further with that question unless we consider what we mean by 'native'. In essence, this is simple: 'a native species originated in a given area without human involvement or arrived there without intentional or unintentional intervention of humans from an area in which it is native'.

In a British context, that means that any plant that arrived here before Britain was separated from Europe by rising sea level at the end of the last glaciation is native. The English Channel drastically reduced the likelihood of any further arrivals, but any European native that managed to get here since then without human assistance is also native. Extremely few plants have done this, but a good insect example is the tree bumblebee, which arrived here from Europe just over ten years ago and is now one of our commonest bees.

A minor complication is that botanists routinely make a distinction between foreign plants that were introduced long ago (for example by the Romans or even earlier, but by convention before 1500), which are called *archaeophytes*, and more-recent introductions, called *neophytes*.

This is where the trouble starts, because almost all our familiar arable weeds (e.g. corn poppy, corn marigold, cornflower) are archaeophytes. The horticultural trade, not surprisingly, would like to be able to market such plants as 'native wildflowers', and so would like to move the native/alien goalposts and make archaeophytes 'honorary natives'. The RHS agreesⁱ recommending that the term "wildflower" in horticulture should refer only to true native *and* pre-1500 introductions. So, apparently, does *Which? Gardening*: in a report that set out to recommend 'native wildflowers' in September 2013, five out of twelve recommended plants were archaeophytes.

But archaeophyte and neophyte are just convenient labels, coined partly because 1500 marks the beginning of the arrival of a whole new wave of species from the New World, and partly because the time of arrival of pre-1500 introductions is normally uncertain, whereas post-1500 introductions can usually be dated more accurately. There's no time limit in the definition of native, so both pre and post-1500 groups are introduced, foreign, exotic, alien or non-native (take your pick of terminology).

Redefining archaeophytes as natives in the hope of shifting a few more units doesn't make sense. It also brings with it the worrying (to me anyway) implication that we're only capable of appreciating wildflowers if we think they're native, and that their merit as garden plants is in some strange way devalued if they're not. In any case, even moving the threshold for UK citizenship to 1500 doesn't help naturalise "wild" plants like the snowdrop or snake's head fritillary, which are recent (post-1500) garden escapes. It would also have the bizarre side-effect of making all Roman introductions native; suddenly, figs, grapes and mulberries would be British natives, which can't be what anyone intended.

Far better, I think, to stick with the consensus of Wikipedia and most online dictionaries, which generally define wildflower as ‘A flowering plant that grows in a natural, uncultivated state; not planted’ or some similar form of words. Which makes sense, and coincides with what most people understand by ‘wild’. Thus fritillaries are wild, irrespective of their native or alien status. Similarly red and grey squirrels are both undoubtedly ‘wild animals’, even though one of them is native and one isn’t.

‘Native’ then becomes something quite separate from ‘wild’, as it should be. If we want to talk about ‘native wildflowers’, then fine. Much the same applies to garden features that may, or may not, contain wildflowers. Thus a meadow can be a ‘native wildflower meadow’, if it consists entirely of British natives, a ‘wildflower meadow’, if it also contains plants that grow wild here, even if they’re not native (e.g. fritillaries), or just a plain ‘flowering meadow’, if it consists entirely of exotic meadow plants.

We can even, if we feel like it, talk about ‘archaeophyte wildflowers’, although I don’t recommend it. If knowing the exact status of a plant is important to you, you can always look it up on the website of the Biological Records Centreⁱⁱ.

Reviewed by Steve Head

ⁱ <https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=853>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.brc.ac.uk/plantatlas>