

Buying native flora

ADVISORY NOTE



*A Scottish
wildflower nursery*

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Buying native plants and seed

Whether buying seeds, wildflower plants, bulbs, shrubs or trees, care should always be taken when purchasing planting stock for habitat restoration or creation projects.

Flora locale recommends that planting stock is obtained from a grower that specialises in British wild plants. The grower should be able to:

- ✿ advise on appropriate species and types of plants for your scheme;
- ✿ verify that the species and plants are of appropriate origin; and
- ✿ advise on quantities, planting methods and site management.

You will need to describe your planting site and project objectives so your supplier fully understands your requirements. If requiring a substantial quantity of plants a personal visit to one or more suppliers is recommended. This will enable you to view the supplier's operation and discuss specific requirements in detail.

Select appropriate species

Choose species that will establish well and that are native and appropriate to the location and habitat objective. Seek advice from a plant ecologist with competence in wild-plant communities if you do not have this expertise yourself.

For wildflower grassland schemes:

- ✿ make sure the mix does not contain annual species such as poppy;
- ✿ choose a seed mix containing species that are suitable for your site;
- ✿ rather than use a standard off-the-shelf mixture, it can often be better to list the species you want and ask the supplier to make up a mix to suit your requirements;
- ✿ wild-harvested mixes of local origin may be more appropriate for large-scale projects in sensitive locations.

See also the Advisory Note *Bringing back the meadows: obtaining native flora*.

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Specify size and type of plant

Choose the product to suit your project and site:

- ☼ for wild flowers, grasses, rushes and sedges: seed, plug or pot-grown plant;
- ☼ for shrubs and trees: the size required; small transplants <40cm are cheapest, quick to plant and normally establish well; seed may be available only if ordered the summer before collection.

Quantity required

Calculate the quantity of seed or plants needed. For large-scale wildflower grassland schemes on bare land, the recommended sowing rate is 15kg/ha. If using crop-grown mixes, the wildflower component can range from 5–20% by weight; a lower proportion of wild flowers will make the seed substantially cheaper.

Planting trees at low density (such as 1,100 per hectare or less) will cost less and allow a shrub and ground flora layer to naturally develop¹. Unplanted areas can also be left to provide glades for butterflies and other wildlife.

Source identification

The origin of plants or seed required should be clearly specified and all terms used clearly explained². Use a supplier who can source-identify all supplied stock: records of the country and county of wild or native origin should be available. Terms of supply should include a condition that no part of your order should be substituted with stock of alternative species or origin to

your specification and that any change must be mutually agreed.

Origin is the place in the wild from which the original seeds or plants were collected. This is not to be confused with **provenance** which is often the location of the nursery where the seeds are produced or the plants grown. For trees, the term "provenance" is often used and is acceptable if the nursery follows the Forestry Commission's Voluntary Scheme for the Certification of Native Trees and Shrubs; the stock should have been grown from source-identified seed of indigenous provenance.

Plant survival

Clarify delivery details; once delivered ensure someone is responsible keeping plants alive before they are planted or, if seed, that it is kept in a dry, cool, vermin-free store.

Survival, once planted, can be maximised by ensuring:

- ☼ planting stock is of good quality;
- ☼ the ground has been adequately prepared;
- ☼ planting takes place at the most appropriate time using best practice methods; and
- ☼ a maintenance plan (especially for weed control) is implemented.

Contract collection and growing

Rather than buying what the supplier already has in stock, consider contract seed collection.

Many specialist growers and nurseries are able to collect seed and, if needed, grow this on according to your requirements. Ordering material in this way is an

Generalist nurseries used by the landscape industry and garden centres may supply cultivated varieties instead of British wild flowers.



Garden polyanthus planted on a Cotswold road verge (instead of cowslip/Primula veris).



Colourful varieties of primrose have been developed for gardens; these are very different from wild primroses.



Wild primrose has smaller, pale yellow petals.

Photos: Stewart Turkington/Sue Everett/Peter Creed.

1. Chewing's fescue sown before planting can reduce future problems with tall weeds. Wildflower plug plants or seed of light-loving species, such as primrose and red campion, can be introduced at the same time.
2. See Flora locale's Go Native! Guidelines for Planting Projects in the Countryside.



Container-grown wild flowers of British native origin are available from specialist growers.



Photo: British Wild Flower Plants



Photo: Sue Everett

Farmyard tree nursery: young trees grown from locally collected seed.

excellent way to ensure that correctly sourced material is supplied. This approach is particularly appropriate for large-scale projects in ecologically sensitive areas.

Restricted availability of supplies

Conservation projects are increasingly asking for planting stock of local origin, but the nursery industry is not always able to fully satisfy demands for this. A balance needs to be struck between the origin of planting stock desired and what is available.

If plants are needed quickly, consider obtaining them from a 'wider area of search' in the UK, perhaps using the Forestry Commission's local seed zones map as a guide³. Alternatively, consider whether your project can make do with less seed or fewer plants, different species, or delay the scheme until contract growing can be organised.

Aquatic and marginal plants

Many wetland plants of non-UK origin have proved to be highly invasive when introduced to the wild. Seed and fragments of exotic invasive species can hitch a ride with other plants purchased from aquarists or garden centres. To reduce this risk, any soil associated with purchased aquatic plants should be washed off on dry land away from watercourses.

Consider waiting for plants to arrive naturally – natural colonisation can be rapid. Alternatively, find some wild plants that will be dug up as a result of routine ditch or pond maintenance (the landowner's permission will be required).

Be aware that aquatic plants on sale at aquarists or garden centres may be garden varieties that are unsuitable for introducing to the wild.

Wildflower seed for the garden

Small packets of wildflower seed sold in garden centres or by mail order have often been specially selected for their ease of growing and visual attractiveness. "Wild" doesn't necessarily mean the species in the packet are wild to Britain or Ireland, or that the stock is of British or Irish native origin. Californian poppy or cultivated varieties of British wild species such as candytuft, are examples of 'wild' flowers sometimes found in mixes.

Claims of "wild" and "origin" on seed packets available from garden centres can sometimes be misleading as suppliers (who are much more used to selling garden plants and vegetable seeds) may use horticultural terminology. For example, "UK origin" can mean the stock plants have been grown in the UK for six months (but the plants themselves may be progeny of non-UK native origin). This does not necessarily matter if the seeds are destined for the garden. However, other terms and product descriptions can be misleading and confusing for the customer and can affect the success of a project.

3. View via www.floralocale.org (see Biogeographic Regions Map section).

If you wish to buy seed of British or Irish wild flowers for your garden:

- ✿ know what you are buying (species, origin, whether annual, biennial or perennial, percentage of wild flowers to grasses in meadow mixes);
- ✿ be sure that what is in the packet is suitable for your planting site and your requirements;
- ✿ appreciate that weeds will grow from seeds already in the soil you are planting into –these must be cut or removed; you will also need to follow a mowing plan for wildflower meadows that will involve cutting the first years' growth several times in spring and summer;
- ✿ understand that creating a meadow of perennial wild flowers and grasses takes several years and that unless you prepare and manage the ground properly, it will fail to establish;
- ✿ for single perennial wild flower species, always germinate seed in trays or plug pots of sterile compost; it will take up to a year before the plants are big enough to plant out, and another six to eight months before they flower; and
- ✿ compare prices: do not impulse buy. Seed available from specialist growers of native flora can be significantly cheaper than expensively packaged tubs or packs of wild flower seed that are aggressively marketed by mail order, or on sale in supermarkets, at garden shows or in garden centres.

Examples of misleading information on seed packets

Product: *Wild flower meadowland mixture.*

Misleading information: the picture on the seed packet includes species that are not included in the seed mixture.

Product: *Wild flower mixture.*

Misleading information: at least one species included in the mix (Dames Violet) is not a British wild flower (and can be invasive if introduced to the wild); the description of species is given as "hardy biennial" when some of the species are perennials.

Customers spotting any inconsistencies are encouraged to contact the seed supplier or local Trading Standards officer.

As a guide price, a general-purpose meadow mixture containing 10 species of British wild meadow flowers in a matrix* of grasses (registered cultivars) can be obtained from specialist growers for less than £30 per kg, or less than £4 for 100g. (100g is sufficient to sow an area 5m x 10m, at 2g/m²). Mixtures of pure wild flowers are more expensive but can be obtained for below £90 per kg or £10 per 100g. Prices given are for pure seed, with no encapsulation or other packing medium.



Further information

- ✿ **www.floralocale.org:** list of suppliers of British and Irish native flora, other advisory notes and publications, e.g. *Go native! Guidelines for Planting Projects*, advice on meadow projects and links to other websites.
- ✿ **www.pondstrust.org.uk:** information on pond plants and wetland creation.
- ✿ **www.forestry.gov.uk:** information on the Voluntary Scheme for the Certification of Native Trees and Shrubs.
- ✿ **www.tretrader.co.uk:** links to suppliers of native trees and shrubs.
- ✿ **English Nature.** *Wildflower meadows: how to create one in your garden.* Available free online (www.english-nature.org.uk/Nature_In_The_Garden/) or tel: 01733 455101.*

* 80% grasses:20% wildflowers.

* This URL and phone no. will change in late 2006/early 2007 when English Nature is transferred into the new organisation Natural England.

For further advisory notes, case studies, *Guidelines for planting projects in the countryside*, training opportunities and suppliers of native flora, go to www.floralocale.org



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