

BRITAIN IN BLOOM



Our native wildflowers are precious, which is why passionate people are working to preserve them.

By **Caroline Roberts**

Imagine a meadow on a warm summer's day. Skylarks are singing, bees are buzzing gently, and the scent of wildflowers fills the air. Sadly, it's an experience that's all too rare nowadays.

Over the past 75 years, we have lost over 97% of our traditional meadows and surveys show that one in five of our native plant species is threatened with extinction. Intensive farming methods and pesticide use are among the causes. Also, many wildflowers thrive in poor soils, and the increasing use of fertilisers, and nitrogen from the air in a sort of 'fertiliser rain', is now emerging as a major threat, according to Dr Trevor Dines, botanical specialist with Plantlife, a charity that aims to celebrate and protect our flora. 'We're turning the countryside into a nation of tough, thuggish plants

that can out-compete our more delicate wildflowers,' he says.

Plants have a fundamental role in supporting other wildlife, adds Dr Dines, and Plantlife is working from the roots upwards to create a sustainable countryside. 'We focus in on individual species and delve into their ecology to understand the threats to their survival. For example, a plant might be very poor at seed dispersal, and when you study it in detail you find that the seed produces an oil that attracts ants. The ants take it into their nests where it germinates. If you lose the ant, you lose the plant.'

'A reason for losing a rare orchid might be that a canopy of the woodland has closed over and the type of bee that pollinates the plant doesn't like coming into woods. It's not just about looking at the plant, but all the things around it and unlocking those little stories.'

In 2012, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee year, HRH The Prince of Wales suggested an initiative that would create meadows around the country to celebrate the 60 years of his mother's reign. The Coronation Meadows project aims to identify one well-preserved traditional

Above and top right: Wildflowers, including tufted vetch, grow in abundance on Treshnish Farm, Isle of Mull

wildflower meadow in every county, seed from which will then be used to create new meadows nearby, filling them with flowers native to the area. This is better for local wildlife and pollinators than bringing in species from other parts of the country.

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

One of the scheme's meadows is at Treshnish Farm on the Isle Of Mull. With its open, moorland environment and rugged surroundings, a meadow on the island is very different to one you might see further south in the country, says owner and farmer, Carolynne Charrington. The farm was the perfect choice for a Coronation Meadow as it stopped using artificial fertiliser in 1997 and went organic two years later.

'We shut off certain fields so there's no grazing there between May and September to allow the plants to flower and set seed,' she explains. 'You then need cows to go in and graze the longer grasses, as sheep will only eat short grass. Then the sheep come and nibble it right down so there's space for the flowers to grow. It's all part of a holistic cycle.'

'In fields where we perhaps found six plants of an individual species 10 years ago, we're now finding a whole bank with hundreds of them. We have 15 different species of orchid, two of which are on the threatened list. My favourite is the fragrant orchid. It's beautifully scented and abundant in certain places on the farm. It's always magical to see an orchid.'

At the Beech Estate near Battle in East Sussex, recently retired manager Keith Datchler OBE has spent 45 years restoring wildflower meadows. It all started back in the 1970s when a small farm, rented for many years by the same family of traditional farmers, was returned to estate management. 'It was a time capsule. When June came round it was just a sea of wildflowers,' says Keith. 'It was one of those moments when your hairs stand on end and you know you're looking at something very special that has to be preserved.'

The estate started experimenting with 'hay strewing', where hay containing seeds is taken to other farms so they can create their own wildflower meadows. But, because modern haymaking techniques shake much of the seed out of the hay before it's transported, there was limited success. They then came up with a method called 'whole cropping', in which you cut the grass with an old-fashioned mower, disturb it very little when it's drying and spread it on harrowed ground to give the seed a better chance. The method was so effective that it has been rolled out across the country, and led to Keith being awarded an OBE in 2009.

THE SEEDS OF SUCCESS

'In two years we were getting results that would otherwise have taken 10 or 15 years with the original method,' he says. 'A really good meadow can have as many as 50 different species per square metre. Every plant will have an insect, butterfly or bee that relies on



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it. There are so many species of grass, but monoculture has turned the landscape into what I call a "green desert". That's why we're losing our diversity. You have to start at ground level and get the plants right. It's the basis of the conservation pyramid.'

The estate has now installed a walkway and organises tours of the meadows. 'We had one old lady sit down at the top of a hill and start crying. She said, "I've just heard skylarks and I've seen a sea of wildflowers. You've given me back my childhood." For people of her era, that's what the countryside looked like. One sadness of the countryside now is that we're told not to touch. I'd love to go back to a time when there were wildflowers everywhere and kids could come home with bunches of flowers. But protecting wildflower meadows is like banking a biodiversity blueprint for future generations.' For information on Treshnish Farm's self-catering holiday cottages, visit www.treshnish.co.uk. For more on tours of the Beech Estate, go to www.highweald.org/look-after/community-projects/landowner-interviews and click on Keith Datchler, Beech Farm Estate.



Fragrant orchid on the Beech Estate

HOW YOU CAN HELP

✿ **COUNT!** Think you know your scarlet pimpernel from your ragged robin, and your lady's smock from your ox-eye daisy? Or perhaps you'd like to learn more about wildflowers? Why not take part in the annual wildflower count organised by Plantlife and its partners? It involves recording species in your local area and can

be done at several levels, depending on your prior knowledge and the time you have available. For information, visit www.npms.org.uk
 ✿ **VOTE!** To celebrate Plantlife's 25th anniversary year, the charity is inviting the public to vote for their favourite wildflower. To choose yours from a gallery showcasing 25 of the UK's most beautiful wildflowers, visit www.plantlife.org.uk/wildflowervote. The results will be announced in June.