



Wild
About
Gardens

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Wild about lawns

Bring your lawn to life



The
Wildlife
Trusts



RHS

In love with lawns

Our lawns are so much more than just a patch of grass. They're a bridge between our living space and the wild world that surrounds it. A central part of many gardens. A place to play and relax, whilst still making room for wildlife. Lawns are sometimes thought of as green deserts, but with the right approach they can become an oasis for many of our natural neighbours.

Lawn and order

Lawns have traditionally been strictly managed. For centuries, grass has been mown as short as possible, no blade allowed to grow out of line. But how many people really need a bowling green for a garden? All that constant trimming costs time and money, and deprives both us and wildlife of the joys of a wilder lawn. It's time for a more forward-thinking fashion.

Grow wild

The difference between weeds and wildflowers is just a matter of perspective – embrace the daisies, dandelions, clovers and other naturally flowering plants and you won't see a weed in sight. A lawn full of wildflowers provides vital food for bees and butterflies, amongst many other benefits. So, ditch the weedkiller, mow less often, and let the flowers flourish!

To make the most of your lovely lawn, mix up the mowing routine. Keep some areas short as pathways or sunbathing spots – and of course hunting grounds for worm-eating birds. For the rest, let the grass grow a little longer, offering shelter to caterpillars, grasshoppers and other insects. In turn, this multitude of minibeasts will create a buffet for birds and bats.

Cover image: Red mason bee © Phil Savoie / naturepl.com
Soldier beetle © Tom Hibbert

Did you know?

It's not just **blackbirds** and **robins** that hunt earthworms – **tawny owls** will sometimes visit lawns to catch them, too.

Many moth and butterfly caterpillars feed on grasses, including the **large skipper** and the **meadow brown**.

The UK has lost over **97%** of its wildflower meadows since the 1930s, so every wildflower we can grow provides a boost to our pollinating insects!

The closely cut 'English lawn' was created in the 17th century, and was a symbol of aristocracy or the upper classes.

Several studies have found that **clovers**, which are common in wildflower lawns, are one of the most frequently visited flowers by bumblebees.

There could be around **200 earthworms** per square metre beneath your lawn!

The lawn mower was invented in Gloucestershire in 1830, inspired by a machine for cutting cloth.

Around $\frac{3}{4}$ of all wild bee species nest in the soil. **Solitary bees** that nest in the ground include **ivy bees** and **ashy mining bees**.

Buff-tailed bumblebees can travel almost **800 metres** in search of pollen and nectar (so let's make their lives easier!).

Garden birds © Jon Hawkins



1 Caterpillars feed on grass that's left to grow

2 Frogs and newts shelter in long grass

3 A mix of wildflowers attracts bees, butterflies, and other pollinators

4 Birds forage for worms and burrowing insects in short grass

5 Even short lawns can help pollinators find food

6 Mining bees make their home in short grass or bare areas

A living lawn

Lawn wildflower spotting sheet



	<input type="checkbox"/> Daisy		<input type="checkbox"/> Dandelion		<input type="checkbox"/> Selfheal		<input type="checkbox"/> Bird's-foot-trefoil		<input type="checkbox"/> Mouse-ear hawkweed
	<input type="checkbox"/> Buttercup		<input type="checkbox"/> Germander speedwell		<input type="checkbox"/> Smooth-stalked meadow grass		<input type="checkbox"/> Clover		<input type="checkbox"/> Yellow rattle

Illustration: Corinne Welch © Copyright Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts 2023

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Lawn wildlife spotting sheet



	<input type="checkbox"/> Tawny mining bee		<input type="checkbox"/> Blackbird (this is a male)		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Black garden ant		<input type="checkbox"/> Meadow brown butterfly		<input type="checkbox"/> Buff-tailed bumblebee
	<input type="checkbox"/> Hedgehog		<input type="checkbox"/> Common frog		<input type="checkbox"/> Earthworm		<input type="checkbox"/> Common field grasshopper		<input type="checkbox"/> Common banded hoverfly

Illustration: Corinne Welch © Copyright Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts 2023

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A natural solution

The climate crisis is already bringing dramatic changes to the UK, from record-breaking heatwaves to flash flooding. But nature has solutions – both to combat the crisis and to help us adapt to the effects we're already experiencing – and lawns can play their part.

Cooling off

As summer heatwaves become more common, keeping cool at home is increasingly important. A lawn can help! Areas covered in grass stay cooler than patches of concrete, stone, or similar materials. The cooling effect can be even stronger if the grass enjoys a bit of shade from nearby trees. Urban greening is estimated to bring savings of almost £300 million a year to our towns and cities, reducing costs of cooling and helping people work comfortably through heatwaves. We can do our part at home by greening our gardens with a luscious lawn – and you can't put a price on feeling cool grass between your toes on a hot day!

Soaking up

Climate change is increasing the chances of extreme rainfall, resulting in a higher risk of flooding across the UK.

Lawns and other garden greenery can reduce the risk in urban areas. Rainwater is slowly filtered through the grass and down into the soil, rather than running off as floodwater. Letting your grass grow a little longer, and allowing a mix of plants to flourish, helps a lawn to soak up even more water. But it's not just water that lawns soak up. The more green vegetation in our towns and cities, the more carbon is captured and stored in our soils!



Cool grass © Matthew Roberts



Ladybird © Jon Hawkins Surrey Hills Photography

Let it grow

Everything grass does, it does better when it's longer! Longer grass has deeper roots, which makes it more resilient to dry spells and less likely to go brown (or need as much watering). A useful feature with the hotter, drier summers predicted to be increasingly common in our changing climate. Long grass even provides places for wildlife to escape the heat, too. By mowing less often we're also cutting down on the carbon footprint of our lawnmowers.



Common frog © Chris Lawrence

Plastic peril

Recent years have seen a surge in the popularity of artificial grass, but these fake lawns are disastrous for wildlife and the environment. They create a sterile, barren landscape that's useless to bees, butterflies, birds, and the many other animals that depend on green space in our gardens. They heat up more than grass, can make flooding worse, can leach plastics into the environment, and provide none of the benefits of a natural lawn. Rather than absorbing carbon dioxide like real grass, from production to disposal, plastic grass leaves behind a hefty carbon footprint. So please, do the planet a favour and keep it natural!

A breath of fresh air

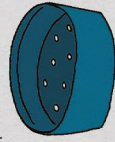
We often think of trees creating the oxygen we breathe, but grass gets in on the act too. Grass also filters the air, trapping dust and other pollutants.

Make a mini lawn



You will need

- Gardening gloves
- Trowel (optional)
- Container with drainage holes
- Soil or peat-free compost
- Lawn grass seed
- Wildflower plug plants*
- Watering can
- Scissors or hand shears



Drill if needed



You don't need a big outdoor space to be the proud owner of a lush lawn. Container lawns are perfect for patios, balconies and window boxes, and are a great way to experiment with different plant mixes on a small scale.

- Place outdoors ideally in a spot where there is lots of light.



- If you are using wildflower plug plants, dot them on the surface and push into the compost with your fingers or a trowel. Water well, and let it drain.



3-5 plants will be enough for most containers

- Sow your grass seed as instructed on the packet and sprinkle a little extra compost over the seed.



No need to water again as compost is damp.

- When the grass reaches 5cm in height, cut it down to 2cm using scissors or hand shears – this will help the grass to thicken up.



Remember to let it grow long enough to allow your wildflowers to flower.

- Remember to check your mini lawn regularly and water if it's drying out.



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*Choose flowers for short grass from our list on page 14

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Bioblitz your grass: set up a quadrat

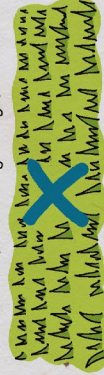


Finding out what's in your grass is the first place to start when measuring its biodiversity.

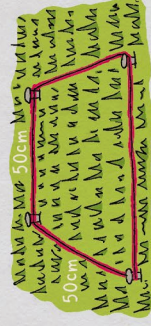
You will need

- Four pegs or sticks
- Brightly coloured string or wool
- A measuring stick or ruler
- 10X hand lens
- Notebook and pen
- Camera or smartphone (to document your findings)
- Spotter guides to help identify what you find

- Firstly decide on the size of your quadrat (we recommend creating a square at least 50cmx50cm) and select a random spot in a grassy patch.



- Push your pegs or sticks into the ground to form the four corners. Wrap your string or wool around the outside of all four pegs to create a square.



- Use the spotter guides to identify the different plants and insects within the square and note down how many of each species you see.



- Repeat on a different patch of grass and/or at a different time of day. The more you repeat, the more accurate your biodiversity snapshot will be!



- Why not survey the area several times throughout the year? You'll be amazed what appears as your grass grows.

Setting up a quadrat is a great way to get a snapshot of what's living in your grass. You might be able to identify different leaves, wildflowers and wildlife depending on whether your grass is long or short, in sun or shade, wet or dry.



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Join the nationwide lawn bioblitz! Show us what you've found using #WildAboutLawns

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Looking after your lawn



Mowing your lawn

Traditional lawns are mown at least once a week from spring to autumn. This is fine for some creatures such as ants and worms but if you reduce the frequency of mowing to once every 3-4 weeks you will allow flowers such as dandelion and speedwell to bloom, helping out pollinators. If you let some of your lawn stay long all summer, you'll give caterpillars chance to feed on the grass and transform into moths or butterflies. So have a play around. If you're only tending to a small patch of grass then a hand-push mower should do the job without using electricity or petrol.

Mow your lawn when it's dry. If you've allowed your lawn to grow really long you might need to take a strimmer to it or, better still, discover the joy of scything!



Let some of your lawn grow long © RHS



Feeding your lawn

If you want to encourage wildlife into your lawn don't use artificial fertilisers. The most effective way to support your lawn and the insects that live there is to leave it be! If you mow the lawn regularly you can also leave the short clippings in place as an easy mulch. Add longer clippings to your compost heap.



Want to learn more about the benefits of leaving your lawn to grow? Check out **Plantlife's No Mow May** campaign.

Red sword-grass moth caterpillar © Vaughn Matthews



Feeling shady

If your lawn gets less than six hours of sunlight a day it may start to look a bit thin. Moss can help a lawn look luscious but if your lawn is very bare you might want to consider a more shade-friendly variety of lawn grass.

Alternatively, you could grow something else in its place. Elephant's ears (*Bergenia*) or lungwort (*Pulmonaria*) for example, are shade-tolerant groundcover perennial plants that will produce pollinator-friendly flowers in spring.



Shady lawn © RHS



Alternative lawns

Lawns don't have to be predominantly grass. Try experimenting with other herbs and flowers. Why not try chamomile or creeping thyme? Both are beautifully fragrant although they aren't as tough as grass, so best grown where there is less foot traffic.



Yarrow © Vaughn Matthews



Water

Say it after us folks, you do not need to water your established lawn! Even if it looks parched and brown in dry weather your grass will bounce back come the next rainfall. You can plant drought-tolerant wildflowers such as yarrow for an even more resilient lawn.



Ivy bee © Wendy Carter



Patchy Lawn

A very muddy or soggy lawn may not be draining well and could need pricking (spiking) with a garden fork. This is a job best done in autumn. A few bare patches here and there in a sunny lawn can actually be just the right spot for ground-nesting solitary bees to make their nests. So don't despair if your lawn doesn't look like a perfect bowling green!

Get wild with your lawn

If you already have a lawn in your garden or greenspace, there are plenty of ways to make it more interesting for wildlife (head back to page 12 to learn about letting your grass grow). A great way to encourage more insects into your garden, and make the most of your space, is by introducing wildflowers.

Top picks for your lawn

Here is a list of British native flowering plants that will do well in an established lawn, as long as you're not feeding it too often. They are all short in their growth habit and should flower on a lawn that is left to grow long for at least 4-6 weeks in spring or summer. Lawn plants must be tough enough to withstand a certain amount of trampling. These can be bought by mail order as plug plants from specialist wildflower nurseries that sustainably source plants of UK provenance.

A bright idea with bulbs

The wildflowers listed here add colour and wildlife-friendly features in late spring and summer. To add early spring interest, pop a few bulbs into your lawn. Snowdrops, crocus, wild daffodils and grape hyacinths all work really well and are much-loved by early bees.

- Black medick
- Daisy
- Dandelion
- Lawn chamomile
- Field wood-rush
- Selfheal
- Bird's-foot trefoil
- Mouse-ear hawkweed
- Cowslip
- Germander speedwell
- Lesser celandine
- Clovers
- Lady's bedstraw
- Yarrow
- Salad burnet
- Yellow rattle (buy as seed, not plug plant)



How to add yellow rattle to your lawn

Yellow rattle is semi-parasitic on grasses so is a handy way to lower the vigour of strong-growing grasses, giving other flowering plants a chance to thrive! It is the only wildflower that can be reliably added to grass from seed. To get the best results the seed needs to be very fresh and sown in late summer or autumn.

- 1 Prepare your lawn for sowing by cutting the grass very short (25mm).
- 2 Rake the grass vigorously in areas to expose some bare soil.
- 3 Scatter some fresh yellow rattle seed onto the raked areas, pressing it firmly into contact with the soil.
- 4 If the weather is dry during the late summer or autumn, water occasionally.
- 5 In spring look for seedlings of yellow rattle in areas you sowed – the leaves are arranged in an X-shape.
- 6 Don't mow the lawn until the yellow rattle plants have flowered and set seed – it is an annual so allow the seed to drop back into your lawn or collect and resow if you want it to grow again the next year.

How to add plugs to your lawn

Wildflower plug plants are best planted between September and May. Hold off planting if the soil is dry, hard or frozen.

- 1 Water your plugs before planting.
- 2 To remove your individual plant plugs, push them up and out using the hole in the bottom of their cell.
- 3 Cut the grass very short and rake out any moss or dead grass at the base of the lawn.
- 4 Arrange the plug plants in swathes across your lawn, spacing out at least 20cm between plants. Putting clusters of the same type of flower close to each other will look more natural than dotting them totally at random. Also try to avoid putting them in straight lines.
- 5 Using a trowel, plant the plug plants so their leaves are level with the base of the grass.
- 6 Keep the plants watered during their first six weeks.
- 7 If the grass continues growing strongly after planting, mow the lawn with the blades high; ideally about 10cm. This won't harm the wildflowers but will stop the grass growing too tall and shading them out.

Measure the biodiversity in your lawn before and after the addition of wildflowers using the quadrat activity on page 11.

About Us

The Wildlife Trusts and the RHS created Wild About Gardens to celebrate wildlife gardening and to encourage people to act for nature. Over the past 50 years, we've seen declines in two thirds of the UK's plant and animal species. Many of our common garden visitors – including hedgehogs, house sparrows and starlings – are increasingly under threat, but collectively gardens can make an incredible difference. To discover more about wildlife gardening and for more resources, visit our website. You can also sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive updates and ideas on all things Wild About Gardens.



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The Wildlife Trusts

The Wildlife Trusts is on a mission to restore a third of the UK's land and seas for nature by 2030. We believe everyone, everywhere, should have access to nature and the joy and health benefits it brings. No matter where you are in the UK, there is a Wildlife Trust inspiring people about nature and standing up for wildlife and wild places. Each Wildlife Trust is an independent charity formed by people getting together to make a positive difference for wildlife, climate and future generations. Together we care for 2,300 diverse and beautiful nature reserves and work with others to manage their land for nature, too. You can help us bring wildlife back in abundance by becoming a member of your Wildlife Trust today.

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The Royal Horticultural Society


For more than 210 years, the RHS has been the force behind gardening in the UK. Our aim is to enrich everyone's life through plants, and to make the UK a greener and more beautiful place. We believe everyone in every village, town and city should benefit from growing – for stronger, healthier and happier communities. Our work in education, science and communities is only possible thanks to the generous support of our visitors, members, partners, donors and sponsors. With your help we can harness the power of horticulture, one gardener at a time.

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