

Sussex Wildlife Trust WG8

Gardening for Wildlife

Factsheet



This is an introduction to choosing suitable native plants for your garden. If you would like more information, please contact the Sussex Wildlife Trust.

Why plant natives?

There are many native plants that would make a decorative addition to a garden – for their shape, flowers or berries. Because natives are often adapted to difficult situations (for example, shade), they can provide useful solutions to planting problems in the garden.

Perhaps most importantly, it is native plants, and not exotic ones, which provide the backbone of habitats in which native insects, birds and mammals thrive. By planting native trees and flowers, particularly if you create a mini-habitat, you may be helping a web of species to survive.

Habitats

You can place native plants among other plants in a garden border. Or you can create a mini-habitat of natives at home in a particular setting. Whichever you choose, the locations of plants in the wild will give clues to what they need to succeed in a garden.

Hedgerow. Hedges provide food and shelter for insects, birds and mammals. Many hedge species like semi-shade. The main skeleton of the hedge should be established first, with species such as hawthorn, blackthorn, evergreen holly, and rambling dog rose. After this, you can plant flowering climbers such as native honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*), old man's beard and wild hop. This kind of combination will give a pretty display of flowers and berries for many months of the year. You can underplant the hedge with traditional hedgerow flowers such as yellow archangel, herb robert, common dog violet, hedge bedstraw, sweet cicely and germander speedwell, to name a few. Hedges have also traditionally contained trees, such as oak and wayfaring tree. If you have the space you could plant one or more trees within the hedge, either coppicing them or leaving them to grow upwards.

Woodland. Plants in woodland form three layers of trees, shrubs and flowers. Trees range from large to small, which you will need to bear in mind when choosing for your garden. Most of the trees listed here will tolerate a range of soil conditions, unless indicated otherwise. Large trees include ash (alkaline soil), beech, wild cherry, small-leaved lime and oak. Medium-sized trees include alder (damp soil), silver birch, field maple (alkaline soil), and yew. Small trees include bird cherry, crab apple, wild pear, cherry plum, rowan (acid soil), wild service tree and whitebeam. Shrubs form either the understorey within the woodland, or scrub at the edge. As a general rule, they tolerate shade, and flower in the spring, before the canopy closes over.

Native Plants

WildCall

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The Sussex Wildlife Trust manages 36 nature reserves and uses its knowledge and skills to help the people of Sussex enjoy, understand and care for wildlife and the places where it lives.

The Sussex Wildlife Trust is one of 47 trusts working to protect wildlife in town and country throughout the whole UK.

For more information on the work of the Sussex Wildlife Trust and how to become a member please contact:

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Native shrubs and climbers for woodland include alder buckthorn, dog rose, elder, guelder rose (alkaline soil), hazel, holly, honeysuckle, and sweet briar (alkaline soil). On the woodland floor, you can plant cyclamen, ground ivy, lily of the valley, sweet violet, wood anemone, wood avens, wood spurge, wood vetch and woodruff.

Grasslands and meadows. The key to flowery meadows is low soil fertility. This is essential if flowers are to succeed in the face of the more vigorous grasses. You can reduce soil fertility by stripping off grass and topsoil, or (if choosing bare ground) you can plant (and harvest) a nitrogen-hungry crop over one or more seasons. You can choose to plant a spring meadow or summer meadow. (For butterfly meadows, see the SWT factsheet on butterflies.) For either, suitable grasses are: brown bent, fine bent, crested dog's tail, downy oat grass, red fescue, sheep's fescue, meadow barley, meadow foxtail, rough meadow-grass, smooth meadow-grass, quaking grass, sweet vernal grass, wavy hair-grass, and yellow oat-grass.

Flower plants for a spring meadow include: bird's foot trefoil, bugle, greater burnet, salad burnet, buttercups, cat's ear, red clover, cowslip, cuckooflower, oxeye daisy, goat's beard, marsh marigold, hoary plantain, ragged robin, meadow saxifrage, germander speedwell, lesser trefoil, kidney vetch, wild daffodil, fritillary, meadow saffron, snowdrop, star of Bethlehem.

For a summer meadow, flower plants include: agrimony, wild basil, lady's bedstraw, greater bird's foot trefoil, meadow buttercup, cat's ear, red clover, meadow crane's-bill, oxeye daisy, knapweeds, goat's beard, hawkbits, meadowsweet, ribwort plantain, common restharrow, scabious's, self-heal, perforate St John's wort, vetches, meadow vetchling, yarrow.

Rockeries and banks. Some plants are suitable for planting in walls, on a pile of rocks and stones within a meadow, or on a flowery bank. These include: bladder campion, bloody crane's-bill, biting stonecrop, common fumitory, harebell, herb-robert, horseshoe vetch, ivy-leaved toadflax, maiden pink, red valerian, rock cinquefoil, sheep's-bit, toadflax, and wild strawberry.

Wetlands. The SWT factsheet on Ponds gives details of suitable native plants for ponds and marshy areas.

How do you obtain native plants?

Garden centres sell native seeds, and some varieties of native species. For any appreciable quantity, it is probably a good idea to contact a specialist supplier. Some suppliers harvest meadow seeds and sell them in appropriate mixtures for a particular habitat (e.g. chalky grassland). Others sell nursery-grown plants.

Remember that it is illegal to dig up plants from the wild. It is generally permissible to harvest seeds, but you must avoid rare plants and protected areas. You also need to consider the impact that seed collecting may have on the wild population, particularly if there are not many plants of that species in the area you have chosen.

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