WildaHome

Sowing Wildflower Seed

SOIL TESTING, SOWING & ESTABLISHMENT GUIDE

When to sow every Wildahome mix, how to test and prepare your ground, how to run a trial sowing, and how to manage a new meadow from the first weeks to the tenth year.



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How to use this guide

A wildflower meadow is made in three stages: **know your ground**, **sow at the right time in the right way**, and **manage it every year after**. Most failures come from the first and third stages, not from the seed. Work through the guide in order, or jump to the part you need.

Garden or small plot

Start at page 3 to pick your route, do the simple soil tests on page 4, then go straight to the calendar on page 8.

Field, paddock or estate

Get a lab soil test first (page 5). On larger or uncertain ground, run a trial sowing a season ahead (page 6).

Project, council or BNG

Record soil results and trial plots as evidence. Pages 5, 6, 12 and 13 cover what to test, monitor and manage.

Six rules that decide success

1. **Low fertility wins.** Wildflowers lose to grass and weeds on rich soil. Never add fertiliser, compost or manure.
2. **Bare soil, firm seedbed.** Seed must touch soil. Into grass, open up at least half the surface.
3. **Autumn is best.** Mid-August to late October for most mixes. Spring is a second choice.
4. **Sow on the surface.** Never bury, rake in or drill deep. Roll or tread it in.
5. **Cut in year one.** Regular cuts with the cuttings removed are what turn seedlings into a meadow.
6. **Take the hay off, every year.** Removing cuttings keeps fertility falling and flowers rising.

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Be patient: a meadow takes three years

Year one is mostly leaves, annual weeds and the odd flower. Year two brings the first real show. By year three the meadow has found its feet, and it keeps gaining species for a decade if you keep cutting and removing the hay.

Choose your Sowing route

Start with what is on the ground **now**, not the picture you want. That decides the mix, the preparation and the sowing window. The letters match the calendar on page 8.

Bare or cultivated ground
Arable, a new build, stripped topsoil, a cleared bed
→ **Route A, C or D**

Existing grass
A lawn, paddock, verge or species-poor field
→ **Route B, or A after clearing**

Awkward or special ground
Slopes, shade, wet ground, coast, grazing land
→ **Route E, F or G**

A · New meadow on bare ground

Sow: an 80/20 meadow mix matched to your soil, at 5 g/m².

The fine native grasses fill the gaps so weeds can't, giving a full sward you can cut and walk on. The most reliable way to make a meadow from scratch.

B · Adding flowers to existing grass

Sow: a 100% mix with Yellow Rattle, into grass scarified to at least half bare soil. **Autumn only.**

The grass is already there, so add flowers only. Harder than Route A, and it relies on hard scarifying and the rattle weakening the grass.

C · Flower-only bed, border or patch

Sow: a 100% mix onto bare soil, at 3 g/m².

For gardens, borders and pollinator patches where you want flowers without grass. Small areas you can hand-weed in the first year.

D · Cornfield annuals

Sow: Cornfield Annuals onto freshly cultivated soil, at 3 g/m², mainly in spring.

Poppy, cornflower and corn marigold in their first summer. They need disturbed soil to return, so re-cultivate each year. Also used as a light nurse crop over a perennial mix.

E · Seed & Mulch Mats

Lay: mats on prepared soil. Each pack of three covers 7.5 m².

For banks, slopes, raised beds and small plots where loose seed would wash off or be eaten. Same timing as the mix inside them.

F · Specialist habitats

Choose: Wetland & Pond, Woodland & Heavy Shade, Hedgerow & Banks, Coastal, Chalk & Limestone, Acidic Soils, Heavy Clay or Loam & Alluvial.

Then follow Route A (80/20), B or C (100%) for the preparation.

G · Grazing land and paddocks

Sow: a Horse & Donkey paddock mix or herb mix, at the per-acre rate on the product page.

Built for grazing, not hay meadows. Spring or early autumn, into a firm seedbed or a well-scarified sward.

H · Local seed: green hay or harvested seed

Spread: fresh hay or seed from a nearby species-rich meadow, in July or August.

The most local seed there is, if you have a donor meadow on similar soil. See page 15.

80/20 or 100%? 80/20 means 80% fine native grasses and 20% wildflowers by weight, for bare ground. 100% is wildflower seed only, for adding to existing grass or sowing flower-only areas. Single-species seed tops up either, or builds your own blend.

Know your soil: simple tests

Four things decide which mix will thrive and how much preparation you need: **acidity (pH)**, **texture**, **drainage** and **fertility**. The first three you can check yourself in an afternoon. Fertility is the one that matters most, and the one that most often needs a lab test (page 5).

1 · pH: a garden-centre kit

Take soil from 5 to 10 spots across the area, about 10 cm down, and mix it. Test the mix, not one spot.

Below 5.5: acid. Choose Acidic Soils.
5.5 to 7.5: neutral. Most mixes suit, such as Traditional, General Purpose or Loam & Alluvial.
Above 7.5: alkaline. Choose Chalk & Limestone.

Quick check for chalk: drop vinegar on a spoonful of soil. If it fizzes, there is free lime in it.

2 · Texture: the squeeze test

Wet a walnut-sized lump and work it between finger and thumb.

Gritty, won't hold together: sandy. Drains fast and is often low in nutrients, which wildflowers like.
Smooth, holds then crumbles: loam.
Sticky, rolls into a long ribbon, shines when rubbed: clay. Choose Heavy Clay, and sow when the ground is workable.

3 · Texture: the jar test

Fill a straight-sided jar a third full with soil, top up with water and a drop of washing-up liquid, shake hard and leave for a day or two.

Sand settles first at the bottom, then silt, with clay on top. The thickest layer tells you which you have most of.

4 · Drainage: the hole test

In a dry spell, dig a hole a spade deep and fill it with water. Let it drain, then fill it again.

Gone within a few hours: free-draining.
Still standing the next day: poorly drained. Choose Wetland & Pond or Heavy Clay. On ground that floods in winter, sow in spring.

5 · Read the fertility clues

Signs of high fertility

- Nettles, docks, creeping thistle, cleavers or fat hen
- Lush, dark-green ryegrass that needs cutting weekly
- A history of fertiliser, slurry, manure, compost or vegetables
- Recently arable, or improved grassland

Signs of low fertility

- Thin, fine-leaved grasses with moss and bare patches
- Wildflowers already present, such as bird's-foot trefoil, knapweed, selfheal or lady's bedstraw
- Grass that grows slowly and stays short without much cutting
- Subsoil, stripped ground, rubble or shallow soil over rock

Don't correct your soil, match it

Don't lime acid ground or feed poor ground. Every soil has its own native wildflower community. Choose the mix that belongs on your soil, and only ever change one thing: bring fertility down.

Lab testing and fertility

Garden kits measure pH well but can't measure fertility reliably. For anything bigger than a garden, or ground with a farming history, a standard agricultural soil analysis is the single best investment you can make before buying seed. Ask a soil lab or farm agronomist for **pH** and **phosphorus (Olsen P)**. Potassium and magnesium usually come on the same report.

How to take a sample

1. **Test 6 to 12 months before sowing**, so you have time to act on the result.
2. **Walk a W across the area** and take 15 to 25 small cores. Go 7.5 cm deep in grassland and 15 cm on cultivated ground.
3. **Avoid odd spots:** gateways, troughs, dung pats, bonfire sites and field edges.
4. **Mix the cores in a clean bucket** and send about 500 g. Sample separately any part that looks or behaves differently.

What your phosphorus result means

P index	Olsen P (mg/l)	What to do
0–1	0–15	**Ideal.** The range where most species-rich meadows sit. Sow any route directly.
2	16–25	**Workable.** Expect strong grass. Use an 80/20 mix on bare ground, or Route B with plenty of Yellow Rattle. Never miss the year-one cuts, and always take the hay off.
3	26–45	**Reduce first.** Strip the topsoil, or crop the ground hard with no fertiliser for a few seasons. Sow Cornfield Annuals meanwhile if you want colour.
4+	46 and over	**Too fertile to sow directly.** A perennial mix will be swamped by grass and weeds. Strip or invert the topsoil, or choose another spot.

Index bands follow the standard UK system used by the Floodplain Meadows Partnership and others. Most fields that have been fertilised in the past test at Index 2 or above.

Bringing fertility down

Strip the topsoil by 100–200 mm and sow into the subsoil. The fastest fix, and the strip can be reused elsewhere as ordinary topsoil.

Invert the soil by deep ploughing to 0.6–1.0 m, burying the rich layer under poorer subsoil. A contractor job for field scale.

Cut and remove several times a year, or take hay crops with no fertiliser. Slow but steady. It can take several years, longest on clay.

Crop it hungry with a cereal or catch crop and no fertiliser, taking everything off. Common on ex-arable land before sowing.

Keep the report. On grant-funded, council or Biodiversity Net Gain projects, a dated soil result is useful evidence that the site was suitable, and a baseline to monitor against.

Trial Sowing

A trial sowing is a few small, marked plots sown before the main job. It shows you what your ground does before you commit the full cost of seed and preparation. It costs a few square metres of seed and a season of patience, and it is the best way to settle a doubt.

When a trial is worth it

- Large sites, roughly a hectare or more, where a failure is expensive
- Choosing between Route A (clear and sow) and Route B (over-sow)
- Ground with a suspected weed seed bank, such as old arable or a former garden
- Fertility on the border (P Index 2) or a soil you don't know
- Projects that need evidence before sign-off, such as BNG, council or grant work
- Mixed sites with a wet hollow, a shaded edge or a dry bank

How to set one up

Plot 1
Your main plan, prepared exactly as you would for the full site.
e.g. cultivated, 80/20 mix

Plot 2
The alternative you're weighing up.
e.g. scarified grass, 100% mix and Yellow Rattle

Plot 3: control
Prepared the same way but **not sown**. It shows what your soil's own seed bank produces.

Plot 4 (optional)
A second mix, or the same mix on the wettest or shadiest part of the site.

1. **Make each plot at least 2 m × 2 m** in a typical part of the site. Peg the corners and label them.
2. **Sow a full season ahead**, for example a trial this autumn and the main sowing next autumn.
3. **Weigh the seed for each plot** at the normal rate: 20 g for a 4 m^2 plot of 80/20, 12 g of 100%.
4. **Photograph from the same spot** every month, and note the date, weather and what you see.

What to look for, and what it tells you

If you see...	It means...
Small wildflower rosettes spread across Plots 1 and 2 by late spring	Good. Go ahead with the cheaper or easier route.
The control plot is thick with docks, thistles or fat hen	A strong weed seed bank. Do more stale-seedbed rounds before the main sowing.
Grass closes over Plot 2 by early summer	Fertility is too high to over-sow. Clear and use Route A, or reduce fertility first.
Very little in any plot, including the control	Check timing, depth and seed contact. Was it buried, too dry, or eaten by birds or slugs?

Ground preparation countdowns

Work back from your sowing date. Preparation takes longer than sowing, and rushing it is the most common reason meadows fail. These countdowns assume an autumn sowing. For spring, shift each step by about six months.

Route A, C, D · Bare ground

12 months+	Soil test (page 5). Reduce fertility if needed, and dig out or treat perennial weeds such as docks, nettles, creeping thistle and couch.
Spring–summer	Clear the vegetation. Lift turf, or cut and remove. On rich ground, strip 100–200 mm of topsoil.
8–6 weeks	Cultivate to about 100 mm. Rake or harrow to a fine, crumbly tilth.
6–2 weeks	**Stale seedbed:** let weeds germinate for 2–4 weeks, then hoe or harrow them off no deeper than 20 mm. Repeat 2–3 times on weedy ground.
Sowing day	Roll or tread until a boot heel barely marks the surface, then sow onto it.

Route B · Into existing grass

12 months+	Soil test. Over-sowing works best at P Index 0–2. Stop all feeding.
Spring–July	Weaken the grass. Cut hard and often, removing every cutting, or graze it tight. Don't let it poach in the wet.
Late July–Aug	Final cut down to about 25 mm. Rake off and remove everything.
Aug–Sept	**Scarify hard** with a scarifier, chain harrow or spring-tine rake until at least half the surface is bare soil. 70% is better. Clear the debris.
Sowing day	Sow the 100% mix and Yellow Rattle straight after scarifying, then roll or tread.

Gardens and small plots: remove the turf and the top 5–10 cm of soil with a spade or turf cutter, fork over, rake level and firm by treading. Leave for a few weeks to settle and hoe off the first weeds.

Mats (Route E): prepare as for bare ground but leave the surface slightly rougher. Lay the mats flat, pin them on slopes, and press them firmly into contact with the soil.

Do this

- Deal with perennial weeds a full season before sowing
- Leave time for at least one stale-seedbed flush
- Work clay only when it crumbles, not when it smears
- Take advice before using any herbicide, and never use it near water

Avoid this

- Adding compost, manure, topsoil or fertiliser
- Deep cultivation just before sowing, which brings up new weed seed
- A fluffy, uneven seedbed where seed falls into gaps
- Sowing into grass that has only been mown short

The Sowing calendar

When to sow every Wildahome mix and method. The letters match the routes on page 3. If a month shows two shades across rows, go by the row for the mix you are using.

Best time to sow **Workable**, with conditions **Avoid**

Rt	Mix or method	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
A	**80/20 meadow mixes** bare ground			▨	▨	▨			■	■	■		
B	**100% mix + Yellow Rattle** into existing grass								■	■	■		
C	**100% mixes** bare ground, beds			▨	▨	▨			■	■	■		
D	**Cornfield Annuals** cultivated soil			■	■	■				▨	▨		
E	**Seed & Mulch Mats** as the mix inside			▨	▨	▨			■	■	■		
F	**Wetland & Pond** spring if it floods in winter			■	■	▨			■	■	▨		
F	**Heavy Clay** when workable			▨	▨				■	■	▨		
F	**Woodland, Hedgerow & Banks** shade, part shade			▨	▨				■	■	■		
F	**Chalk, Coastal, Acidic, Loam** and other habitat mixes			▨	▨	▨			■	■	■		
	Yellow Rattle on its own								■	■	■	▨	
	Single species most perennials			▨	▨				■	■	■		
G	**Paddock & grazing mixes** spring or early autumn			■	■	■			▨	■	■		
H	**Green hay** from a donor meadow						▨	■	■	▨			

Best window, mid-August to late October. The soil is warm and autumn rain is reliable. Many species need a winter's cold before they will germinate, and they get it in the ground.

Spring, late March to May. Sow once the soil has warmed and before it dries out. Cold-needing species may wait until the following spring to appear.

November to February: don't sow. Cold, wet soil, slugs and birds take seed before it can establish. Yellow Rattle by the end of November is the one exception.

June and July: too dry for most. Use the summer to prepare the ground for an autumn sowing. Green hay is the exception, spread when the donor meadow's seed is ripe.

Getting the timing right

Autumn Sowing

- Warm soil and reliable rain, so no watering
- Winter cold breaks the dormancy of many native seeds
- Seedlings root before spring weeds and grass take off
- The only time Yellow Rattle and Route B work
- Too late on cold, wet or upland ground means slugs and rot

Spring Sowing

- Best for Cornfield Annuals, which flower the same summer
- Best for ground that floods or stays waterlogged in winter
- Leaves more time for preparation on a new site
- A dry May can stall germination until autumn
- Cold-needing species may not appear for a year

Seeds that need a winter

Some native wildflowers won't germinate until they have been through weeks of cold, wet soil. This is called stratification. **Yellow Rattle** needs around four months below about 5 °C, so it must go in by the end of November, from fresh seed. **Cowslip** and **primrose** behave the same way. If a single-species product page says *Best sown: autumn*, take it literally. In a mix sown in spring, these species simply sit in the soil and appear the following year.

Adjust for where you are

Upland, northern and exposed sites such as the Welsh hills, the Pennines and Scotland: aim for mid-August to mid-September, before the soil cools. Sow spring later, in April to May.

Lowland England and the Welsh borders: the full window, mid-August to late October, with September to early October usually the sweet spot.

Mild coastal south and west such as Cornwall, Devon and Pembrokeshire: autumn sowing can run into late October. Spring sowing can start in March.

Choosing the day

- Soil moist but not sticky, and rain forecast in the next few days
- Not onto frozen, waterlogged or dust-dry ground
- A still day, because light seed drifts in the wind
- Not straight after cultivating: firm the seedbed first

Missed the window?

Don't sow into cold winter ground. Keep the seed sealed in its packet, somewhere cool, dry and dark, and sow at the next window. Use the time for another stale-seedbed round. Most wildflower seed keeps well for a season stored like this. Yellow Rattle is the exception: it loses viability within 12 to 18 months, so sow it the autumn you buy it.

How much and how to sow

Product	Rate	Per hectare	A 100 g pack covers
80/20 meadow mixes	5 g/m²	50 kg	about 20 m²
100% wildflower mixes	3 g/m²	30 kg	about 33 m²
Cornfield Annuals	3 g/m²	30 kg	about 33 m². As a nurse crop over a perennial mix, use about 1 g/m².
Yellow Rattle	0.5–1 g/m²	5–10 kg	100–200 m². Use the higher rate into thick grass.
Seed & Mulch Mats	7.5 m² per pack of 3	–	Lay edge to edge. Don't overlap.
Paddock & grazing mixes	per product	see page	Rates are given per acre on each product page.

Add up to 30% on slopes, exposed sites and when over-sowing into grass. Don't go higher. More seed means more competition between seedlings, not more flowers. **Worked example:** a 250 m² paddock corner sown with an 80/20 mix needs 250 × 5 g = 1.25 kg.

Sowing by hand, step by step

1. **Weigh the seed for the area.** On small plots, mark out metre squares with canes or string.
2. **Mix the seed into a carrier:** 3 to 4 parts dry silver sand to 1 part seed. You can see where you've been, and the fine seed spreads evenly.
3. **Split it in two.** Sow the first half walking up and down, and the second half walking across at right angles.
4. **Stir as you go.** Small seeds sink to the bottom of the bucket and big ones rise to the top.
5. **Leave it on the surface.** Never deeper than 5 mm. Many species need light to germinate.
6. **Roll or tread it in** to press seed onto soil. Don't rake it in, rotavate or drill deep.

Larger areas: a hand spinner or a tractor-mounted broadcaster, set very low and run in two passes. A seed drill only with the coulters lifted to surface-sow.

Rolling: a garden roller on small plots, or a Cambridge or flat roller on fields, after sowing on a dry surface.

Watering: none for autumn sowings. For spring sowings on small areas, give a fine spray in a long dry spell over the first six weeks.

Birds and slugs

On small plots, net the area for the first few weeks or lay brushwood over it. Sowing into a firm, fine seedbed and rolling straight away keeps losses down on any scale.

The first 12 weeks

The weeks after sowing are the time people most often decide a meadow has failed, usually wrongly. Native perennials are slow and small at first. Here's what normal looks like.

After an autumn sowing

Weeks 1–3 Little to see. Annual weeds from the soil often appear first. In 80/20 mixes, a haze of fine grass shows in warm soil.

Weeks 3–8 Tiny paired seed leaves appear, and some grow into small rosettes. Many species wait for spring.

Weeks 8–12 Growth stops for winter. The ground can look almost bare. This is normal.

Feb–April The main flush of germination, including Yellow Rattle and the cold-needing species.

After a spring sowing

Weeks 1–2 Fast-growing weeds and Cornfield Annuals often show first.

Weeks 2–6 Most germination, as long as the soil stays moist. A dry spell simply pauses it.

Weeks 6–12 Weeds race ahead of the slower perennials. Start the year-one cuts when growth reaches 100–150 mm (page 12).

Summer Cornfield Annuals flower. Perennials stay as leafy rosettes until next year.

Telling seedlings apart

Wildflowers start with two seed leaves, usually rounded or oval, then true leaves that differ in shape. Many sit flat as rosettes in their first year.

Grasses come up as a single thin, upright blade. In an 80/20 mix these are the fine native grasses doing their job.

Common first weeds are chickweed, groundsel, fat hen, redshank, docks and thistles. The year-one cuts deal with the annual ones.

Do this

- Keep people, dogs and vehicles off soft ground
- Dig out young docks and thistles while they're small
- Top lightly in late autumn only if growth passes about 150 mm
- Take a dated photo from the same spot each month

Avoid this

- Re-sowing or digging over because "nothing came up"
- Feeding, or spraying weeds across the whole area
- Hand-weeding seedlings you can't yet identify
- Grazing livestock on a newly sown area

Wait for spring before you judge an autumn sowing. The real test comes in May and June, when you should see small wildflower rosettes scattered through the sward. If you're unsure, email a photo to hello@wildahome.co.uk and we'll tell you what's coming up.

Year one management

In the first year, cutting does more than anything else to decide what your meadow becomes. Fast annual weeds and grasses are cut back before they shade out the slow wildflower seedlings, which then root deeply and flower from year two. What you do depends on your route.

Routes A, C, E and F · Perennial mixes on bare ground

- **Cut when growth reaches 100–150 mm**, taking it down to 50–60 mm, or 100 mm on stony ground.
- **Remove every cutting**, raked up or collected. Left lying, it smothers seedlings and feeds the soil.
- **Expect 3 to 5 cuts** between May and September, more in a wet, growthy year.
- **Final cut in September or October**, so the sward goes into winter short.

Route B · Over-sown grass with Yellow Rattle

- **Up to early April:** one light cut if the grass is getting away, above the rattle seedlings.
- **Late July to August:** cut once the rattle pods rattle when shaken. Leave the hay a few days, then remove it.
- **April to July: no cutting or grazing.** The rattle must flower and set seed.
- **Autumn:** keep it short by mowing or light grazing, then scarify any thick patches and top up the rattle.

Route D · Cornfield Annuals

Leave them to flower and set seed. No cutting through summer. Cut and clear in autumn, then cultivate the ground lightly before next spring. Without disturbance they fade after a year or two, and that is how annuals are meant to behave.

Nurse annuals over a perennial mix

Skip the early cuts so the annuals can flower. Then, when they start to flop, clear everything to 50–100 mm: late July after an autumn sowing, early August after a spring one. After that, follow the perennial routine.

Problem plants in the first year

Docks	Dig out with a dock spud, cutting at least 150 mm below the crown. Take the root away.
Creeping thistle	Cut or pull at tight bud, before it flowers. Repeated cutting weakens it within two to three seasons.
Common ragwort	Pull when the ground is damp, getting the whole crown, and remove it from site. It is toxic to livestock, worst when dried in hay.
Nettles, couch	A sign of fertile patches. Cut repeatedly and remove the cuttings. Deal with large stands before sowing next time.

Year two onwards: the meadow year

From the second year, a meadow runs on one simple cycle, repeated every year. Let it grow and flower, cut it for hay once the seed has set, take the hay away, and keep it short through autumn and winter.

JAN – FEB

Short and resting

The sward stays short from autumn. Keep heavy machinery and stock off wet ground.

MAR – JUNE

Shut up to grow

No cutting, no grazing. Let everything grow, flower and set seed. Pull ragwort, cut thistles at bud.

LATE JULY – AUG

The hay cut

Cut once Yellow Rattle rattles and most flowers have set seed. Dry, turn, then remove it all.

SEPT – DEC

Aftermath

Graze lightly or mow the regrowth, removing cuttings. Hooves press in seed and open gaps.

Taking the hay cut

1. **Cut to 50–75 mm** with a mower, scythe, strimmer or reciprocating cutter bar.
2. **Leave it lying 2–5 days** so seed drops back into the meadow. Turn it once.
3. **Take it all off**, baled for hay, composted elsewhere or used as green hay for a new site.
4. **Leave 10–20% uncut** in a different strip or corner each year, as winter shelter for insects.

Grazing the aftermath: cattle and ponies suit meadows well, and sheep in small numbers. Take stock off before the ground gets wet enough to poach, and keep them off from March until the hay cut.

No livestock or machinery? On garden and community meadows, cut with a scythe or strimmer, rake up the hay, then mow on a high setting once or twice in autumn with the collector on.

What arrives, and when

Years 1–2

Yellow Rattle, meadow buttercup, selfheal, yarrow, red clover

Years 3–4

Oxeye daisy, knapweed, cowslip, field scabious, lady's bedstraw

Years 5–7

Common spotted and bee orchids may arrive on their own

Years 7–10

The slowest and rarest species settle in, and the meadow matures

Keep a simple record. Each June, photograph the same spots and note which species are flowering. On larger or funded sites, a fixed 1 m^2 square counted each year gives clear evidence of progress, and shows early if grass is winning.

TroubleShooting

Most problems have a simple cause and a fix you can make in the next season. Before you dig anything over, read across.

What you see	Likely cause	What to do
Nothing came up	Autumn sowing that's still dormant. A dry spring. Seed buried too deep, raked or drilled in. Eaten by birds.	Wait until May or June before judging. Next time sow on the surface, roll, and net small plots.
All weeds in year one	The soil's own seed bank: fat hen, chickweed, docks and thistles. Normal on ex-arable or garden ground.	Keep up the year-one cuts and remove the cuttings. Annual weeds won't survive regular cutting. Dig out docks.
All grass	Fertility too high. Cuttings left lying. Missed year-one cuts. In an 80/20 mix in year one, the grasses are simply first.	Sow Yellow Rattle this autumn. Take every hay crop off. Test the soil, and reduce fertility if it is Index 3 or more.
Patchy, with bare gaps	Uneven sowing, seed separated in the bucket, wet hollows, or a bank washed off by rain.	Over-sow the gaps in autumn at the normal rate. Use mats on slopes, and a wetland mix in hollows.
Poppies and cornflowers didn't return	They are annuals that need disturbed soil. In a perennial sward they fade after year one.	Expected. For annual colour every year, keep a strip that you cultivate each winter (Route D).
Yellow Rattle failed	Sown in spring, seed more than a year old, grass too thick, or cut before it set seed.	Sow fresh seed August to November into hard-scarified ground. Don't cut from April until it rattles.
Lots of flowers, then decline	Hay left on, no cut, or too much grazing in spring. Scrub such as bramble or blackthorn creeping in.	Return to the yearly cycle on page 13. Cut back scrub in winter, outside the bird nesting season.
One species takes over	Often oxeye daisy or red clover in the early years, on slightly richer ground.	Usually settles by year three or four as the sward matures. Keep cutting and removing the hay.

Still not sure?

Send us two or three photos, one wide and one close-up, with your sowing date and route, to **hello@wildahome.co.uk**. We're happy to look and suggest the next step.

Own seed and green hay

If there's a species-rich meadow near you, its seed is the most local there is. These are the methods used by Plantlife's Magnificent Meadows partnership and the Wildlife Trusts. They work alongside bought seed. They don't replace it.

Green hay: freshly cut hay spread on the new site

1. **Match the donor.** It should be close by and on similar soil, pH and wetness. Chalk grassland seed won't do well on acid ground.
2. **Prepare the receiving site first**, with at least 50% bare ground, exactly as for Route B.
3. **Cut when most seed is ripe**, usually July to August, a little earlier than a normal hay cut.
4. **Spread it the same day**, ideally within an hour. Piled hay heats up fast and kills the seed.
5. **About 1 to 3:** hay from one area of donor meadow spreads thinly over about three times that area. Shake out the clumps with a fork.
6. **Press it in** by rolling, or by a few days of cattle treading, then keep the regrowth short in the first autumn.

Collecting seed by hand or brush harvester

Pick on a dry day once the dew has gone, when seed heads are brown and shed easily. Use paper bags or cloth sacks, never plastic. A brush harvester behind a quad or tractor collects seed from the standing meadow before the hay cut.

Drying and storing

Spread the seed thinly on sheets in an airy shed and turn it daily until it's dry. Damp seed goes mouldy within days. Store it in paper or cloth, somewhere cool, dry, dark and mouse-proof. Sow it the same autumn if you can.

Sowing what you collect

Brush-harvested seed is bulky and full of chaff, so you can't weigh it the way you weigh bought seed. As a starting point, spread it over about the same area it came from, or up to two or three times that if the harvest was heavy. Sow it on the surface in autumn and roll it in, as on page 10. Expect fewer species than the donor meadow, and add Yellow Rattle if it isn't already in the harvest.

Do it responsibly

- Always get the landowner's permission before you cut or collect
- Take green hay from a donor no more than once every three years
- Never collect from a designated or protected site without consent
- On grant-funded or BNG sites, check the scheme's seed rules first

Want county-sourced seed instead? Wildahome supplies regionally sourced mixes and can make bespoke blends for your soil and area. See our county guides at wildahome.co.uk, or email hello@wildahome.co.uk.

Quick reference

The key numbers in this guide, on one page. Pin it in the shed.

Sowing rates

80/20 meadow mixes: **5 g/m²** (50 kg/ha)

100% wildflower mixes: **3 g/m²** (30 kg/ha)

Cornfield Annuals: **3 g/m²**, or **about 1 g/m²** as a nurse crop

Yellow Rattle: **0.5–1 g/m²**

Seed & Mulch Mats: **7.5 m²** per pack of three

Slopes, exposed sites, over-sowing: **add up to 30%**

When to sow

Best: **mid-August to late October**

Workable: **late March to May**

Don't sow: **November to February**

Yellow Rattle: **autumn only**, by the end of November

Over-sowing grass (Route B): **autumn only**

Cornfield Annuals: **March to May** is best

Preparing the ground

Soil test: **6–12 months** ahead. Aim for P Index 0–2

Topsoil strip on rich ground: **100–200 mm**

Cultivate to **about 100 mm**, then a stale seedbed for **2–4 weeks**

Kill the weed flush no deeper than **20 mm**, 2–3 rounds

Into grass: cut to **25 mm**, scarify to **50%+ bare**

Sow no deeper than **5 mm**, then roll

Cutting

Year one: cut at **100–150 mm** down to **50–60 mm**

Year one: **3–5 cuts** May to September, cuttings removed

Hay cut from year two: **late July–August**, to **50–75 mm**

Leave the hay **2–5 days**, turn once, take it all off

Aftermath: graze or mow **September–December**

Leave **10–20% uncut** each year

WildaHome

Need a hand?

We help gardeners, landowners, councils and project teams choose the right mix and get it established. Send photos, a soil result or a site plan and we'll advise.

hello@wildahome.co.uk · 0333 242 0602 · wildahome.co.uk

Further reading

Plantlife, *The Good Meadow Guide* and the Magnificent Meadows technical guides, including restoration using green hay and collecting, storing and spreading wildflower seed. Floodplain Meadows Partnership, soil sampling method and phosphorus ranges. Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, meadow management work calendar. Your local Wildlife Trust can advise on local seed sources and donor meadows.

This guide is general advice. Results depend on site, soil, weather and management, which are outside our control. © Wildahome 2026.