

A garden woodmeadow

Each season there is a different spot in our garden at home which draws me in every time I go out. So often it is the wilder parts where there is much less sense of human intervention than among the formal beds and lawn. These are where we have created our own small woodmeadow.

Last summer I was entranced by the meadow under the trees in the orchard with the first appearance of orchids. This year at the beginning of lockdown in April, I was busy peering at the seedlings in our unmown lawn. Now it is the glade in our small area of woodland that has me enraptured. It is surrounded by tall trees, including a fine old ash. There is a shrubby understorey to filter the wind and offer refuge to wild creatures, and below that a carpet of long grasses tangled with flowers. Under the trees magical dappled light plays. The bumble bees buzz their spells and the blackbird sings overhead, the shaggy frills of ragged robin flutter in the breeze.



Planning was the key to the creation of this haven. I like the idea of a walk as a starting point and here I tried to group trees and shrubs round a space to create either a 'ride' or a 'glade', taking a particular tree as a focal point. Then we had to decide what trees would work, what shrubs we'd include, and work out the ground flora too. Followed by a consideration of how to manage everything (see plan on page 5).

Let's start with the trees. There are around 35 native species of tree and shrub in the UK. Therefore, if you're keeping it native, the choice is not huge. If you are lucky enough to have room for an oak, go for it. If not, most gardens can still accommodate a tree or two. Generally, your choice of species will be determined either by what's already there or by the size of your plot. I like to choose trees which respond well to pruning so you can keep them in check. I understand Miriam Rothschild's particular love of the cherry (1), but I wouldn't be happy having to restrict its growth. I would therefore tend to favour a crab apple (*Malus sylvestris*) over a wild cherry (*Prunus avium*) for a mid-size tree. Otherwise, I might go for a rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) which has light feathery leaves and a tidy, upright habit. I have seen beautiful multi-stemmed ones. Bird cherry (*Prunus padus*) has quite a compact habit and its scent filled the air all along the Wolds Way when I walked it one May. All of these trees flower in spring and bear fine autumn fruit.

Hazel provides excellent screening and is very versatile. It can be grown as a tree, a free-standing shrub or excellent hedge. You can enjoy its elegant, vase-shaped, arching habit either as a tall tree or as a shrub. If you prefer to keep it coppiced as a shrub, you could plant three or five whips together to speed things up, cutting the stems out from the bottom as you need them for supports for your beans and delphiniums.

If you would like to add in some evergreen, which often makes a good foil for the brighter more colourful species as well as offering shelter, you can choose between holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), yew (*Taxus baccata*) or box (*Buxus sempervirens*). All of these can be clipped.

The shrub layer in a woodmeadow can be filled from the species of our native hedgerows. The pollen and nectar of these plants is useful for many insects, including bees, and the berries are a winter food source for birds. I am particularly pleased that our own hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) blossomed magnificently this spring as I didn't go out as much usual to relish the glory of its blossom smothering the local hedgerows. Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) has little red berries and fruits that always remind me of storks flying with their precious bundles, while the clusters of red berries on the Guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*) blaze like beacons as winter comes.

I remember Robin Lane Fox writing that he had planted buckthorn in the gardens at New College, Oxford, and sure enough, the next year the Brimstone butterfly was there. Buckthorn leaves from both purging buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) and alder buckthorn (*Rhamnus frangula*) provide food for the caterpillars of the Brimstone, and the acid yellow flash when they emerge in spring is a joy to behold. Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) has leaves that fade to rich crimson and produces glistening black berries, the latter luring a multitude of finches and thrushes.

I would avoid blackthorn as it creates suckers without any neighbourly forbearance, so probably best left to the hedgerows outside your garden. Again, scrambling wild roses (*Rosa canina*), or eglantine, look beautiful with their pale pink flowers, but are prickly to handle and hard to keep tamed.

A circle of mulch around their feet is enormously helpful for the trees and shrubs. The best mulch that I have found for keeping moisture in and not rotting down too quickly is Melcourt's Spruce Ornamental. Lay it 4 inches thick if you can, though you must keep it away from the collar of the plant (where the lenticels or air holes are). I would avoid mulch mats, as they are greatly favoured by nesting voles.

So what about the ground flora to complete your woodmeadow? The stems and branches of the trees and shrubs will fill up only a tiny proportion of the ground, and it will be years rather than months before they cast a deep shade, so your choice of flora is critical. Keep in mind the particular delight of a woodmeadow environment, so aptly described by our patron, Professor George Peterken OBE: "Traditional woodmeadows are an attractive and ever-changing mix of meadow and woodland in which the sward is the most diverse recorded in the north temperate world."

Establishing a diverse ground flora provides an endless source of interest. If your space is already predominantly covered with amenity ryegrass (bright green, narrow leaves which are shiny, especially on the back of the blade), it is probably best to strip it off and start again. You could then add a thick layer of sand or 'ballast' to create a layer that would bury the nutrients and weed seed as well as be easier to keep weed-free. If you have fine grasses, then harrow or scarify them hard (leaving at least 50% bare soil), and then sow seed as soon as it is damp in the autumn (but the soil is still warm) as many woodlanders require winter chilling for germination. Carefully remove all large perennial weeds to make the site as weed-free as possible when you start.

Canes are a useful prop to sketch out your spaces on the ground when you are making your plan. The area nearest the trees and shrubs represents the 'woodland edge'. Here, you can use marginal species which are tolerant of shade but have a wide habitat range in wood margins, rides and hedgerows and can be planted for the first metre or two or three, depending on the size of your trees and garden. Radiating out beyond this lies your 'open meadow'. You can adapt this idea according to the configuration of your trees and shrubs. In time, the plants will colonise and spread into the areas with the light levels that suit them. I would try to establish plants in drifts of the same species to mimic natural patterns.

There are two methods you can use for establishment – you can either grow from seed, or you can introduce ready-grown plants. For the woodland edge I would start a number of species from seed, such as bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*), foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), stitchwort (*Stellaria holostea*) and red campion (*Silene dioica*). Good seed merchants such as Emorsgate (2) will help you work out ideal sowing rates. I would also want to use other species that do not establish easily by seed (3). These are best introduced as plants (4), such as bugle (*Ajuga reptans*), primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), wood spurge (*Euphorbia amygdaloides*) and ground ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*). I would generally lay them out to a density of 6-9 plants per square metre and it is best to leave the plants to grow until the roots fill a 9cm pot before planting out. If you are just using plants and not sowing, leaf mould makes an ideal mulch in between.

In the open areas, you can sow meadow species. Earlier in the spring, bright blue germander speedwell (*Veronica chamaedrys*) wove its way through the glade in our woodland and the cowslips (*Primula veris*) appeared. Then I was up to my knees in ragged robin (*Lychnis flos-culculi*). Creeping up amongst the grasses, lady's bedstraw (*Galium verum*) will soon open into soft clusters of yellow flowers that smell of hay. Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) and birdsfoot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) are also starting to flower and will be joined by ferny-leaved yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) and self-heal (*Prunella vulgaris*). I have been enjoying playing with the various grass areas under or at the edge of the trees, adding a few plants here, a bit of meadow or hedgerow seed there. All the while I am building a tapestry of ground flora to complement the shrubs and trees, and to enrich the insect life of the garden, creating a drumroll of colour as each flower comes into its own.

Grasses will surely find their own way in, but where you have bare soil, I'd be tempted to give the flowers a head start. Many grasses will thrive in part shade as well as sun. Given that success with diversity depends on competition and no one species outdoing the others, be careful to choose fine grasses, such as Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*), Sweet Vernal-grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*), Brown Bent (*Agrostis vinealis*), Sheep's Fescue (*Festuca ovina*), Smaller Cat's-tail (*Phleum bertolonii*) and Crested Hair-grass (*Koeleria macrantha*). Yorkshire Fog (*Holcus lanatus*) is ever present in our soil but where I can I cut it early to stop it setting seed.

As far as managing the woodmeadow goes, it's well worth doing some weeding. I take out dock (*Rumex* species), bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*) and common nettle (*Urtica dioica*), as well as thuggish grasses such as couch (*Elymus repens*), reassured there is no shortage of them in the wider countryside. In order to encourage as much wildlife as possible, it is rewarding to have a variety of sward height and flowering times. July is usually the time to cut the open meadow area and then collect and remove the cuttings. This helps maintain the diversity and means there is a second flowering of the red clover and birdsfoot trefoil in the autumn, and hopefully the yarrow and the self-heal too. Cutting of the woodland edge part of the meadow can be left until the end of the summer, but to be sure to see the primroses and early spring bulbs it may be good to cut again in December. If you have the space, it is ideal to leave a portion of your woodmeadow uncut each year as this is of great benefit to invertebrates. And if you find that your grass is becoming too dominant, you can always add some yellow rattle (5).

You may be tempted to introduce wild garlic or ramsons (*Allium ursinum*) or cow parsley (*Anthriscus Sylvestris*). I would be wary of doing this because they tend to be too successful, dominating and shading out other species. Each year, just as the cow parsley comes into flower but before it sets seed, we get to work with a ragwort fork and patiently remove it all.

Mowing a meandering path of a single mower's width through the sward instantly gives a magical quality to the woodmeadow. The path was cut to lead to a rickety fold-up table and chairs I came across, rescued by cable ties, creating a favourite go-to niche in the garden. One of the few advantages of the lack of rain has been not having to run in and out with the cushions too often.

There are many other species of trees and flowers which I haven't mentioned. Seed houses such as Emorsgate have excellent advice notes to help you. They will sell seed of individual species as well as a variety of mixes including native grasses. Look around in local woodlands too to see what species are happy in your soil. On a recent walk I was mesmerised by the charm of native honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*) which would be a great addition to scramble over fences. If you plant trees as whips in November, you will hardly need to water them and with a little patience they will catch up soon enough. Local provenance is best.

Finally, an extra bonus would be a small pond. Worried about the hedgehogs being thirsty, I started with an upturned dustbin lid. But you could be much more ambitious and dig out a pond with a liner, use a fibreglass pond (6), or perhaps even go so far as to line one with clay.

At Woodmeadow Trust our ambition is for a woodmeadow in every parish, but why do we not go one better and have a fairy dell in every garden?

1. Butterfly Gardener by Rothschild, Miriam, Farrell, Clive (ISBN: 9780718122584)
2. Emorsgate <https://wildseed.co.uk/>
3. [file:///C:/Users/Rosalind/Downloads/Joanna_Lynne_Francis-1993-PhD-Thesis%20\(6\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Rosalind/Downloads/Joanna_Lynne_Francis-1993-PhD-Thesis%20(6).pdf)
4. Naturescape offers a good range of wildflower plants <https://www.naturescape.co.uk/>, as does Poyntzfield Herb Nursery in Scotland <https://www.poyntzfieldherbs.co.uk/>, or better still find a local supplier, e.g. in Yorkshire Mires Beck Nursery <https://www.miresbeck.co.uk/>
5. <https://www.woodmeadowtrust.org.uk/DB/news-items/the-lawn-to-mow-or-not-to-mow-that-is-the-question>
6. <https://www.simonkingwildlife.com/shop/mammals-and-amphibians/frogs/wildlife-whisperer-pond/#>

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woodland edge seed

open meadow seed

a garden wood meadow

to house

primrose

wood spurge

bugle

ground ivy