

ANALYSIS

Gardeners go wild for wildflowers

Sales of wildflower seeds are soaring. But why?

Author: **Sally Nex**, Freelance writer

Wildflowers may be fighting their corner in the countryside but increasingly

they are finding a home in Britain's gardens. Interest has reached unprecedented levels and demand for wildflower seed is at an all-time high.

Sales at Thompson & Morgan have risen by 60 percent in the last year, while at Scotia Seeds sales rose by 57 percent from 2009 to 2011. Suffolk seed company Mr Fothergill's reports wildflower seed sales are up more than 50 percent since 2010. *Papaver rhoeas* (field poppy) is its most popular single species, and a 'cornfield mix' its best-selling blend.

Driven by wildlife

Wildflowers have enjoyed a high profile this year partly due to the Wild about Wildflowers theme for RHS Britain in Bloom, and the

meadow-style plantings for the London 2012 Olympic Park.

At The Wisley Plant Centre, wildflower seed sales shot up by 310 percent on last year, boosted by a partnership with gardener Sarah Raven promoting pollinator-friendly plants. Sarah's springtime BBC2 TV series about gardening for wildlife is also credited with spurring a leap in wildflower seed sales.

'I think the driver for wildflower sales is wildlife,' said Tim Jeffries, Commercial Director at Mr Fothergill's. 'Is it an upsurge in wildflower sales, or an upsurge in sales of flowers for bees, butterflies and so on? I would suggest the latter.'

Making meadows

Although there is no firm data on how gardeners are using wildflowers, there has definitely been a trend in making 'mini-meadows'. Nick Mann, of wildflower seed specialist Habitat

FURTHER INFORMATION

❖ www.plantlife.org.uk

❖ www.floralocale.org

❖ www.habitataid.co.uk

A mini-meadow or 'wildflower' patch, with or without natives, can be a good way to help wildlife in your garden.

Taming 'wild' flowers

Taken in its purest sense, a British wildflower is an uncultivated species native to Britain. But in gardening, the term can be confusing.

For example 'Honey Bee Flower Mixed' from Thompson & Morgan includes American native *Echinacea purpurea*. Others like widely sold *Centaurea cyanus* (cornflower) Polka Dot Series include British natives and highly bred cultivars.

'In a garden or an urbanised landscape the definitions are not critical,' said Helen Bostock, RHS Senior Horticultural Advisor. 'But in more sensitive areas you should do your homework and choose flowers that are the most appropriate for what you want to achieve.'



RHS / ALI CUNNEY

Aid, said customers are choosing showier wildflowers like *Centaurea scabiosa* (greater knapweed) to use in permanent planting schemes, and annual mixes for temporary displays.

He added that there is a clear distinction between wildflowers for habitat creation and those for garden design. 'Traditional wildflower seed businesses are aimed at conservation projects – ecologists replacing habitats,' he said. 'It's quite distinct from the growth we're seeing now, which is individuals buying mixes.'

The upsurge in sales is not trouble free. There is concern about seed provenance and the dilution of native gene pools. Fiona Guest, of Scotia Seeds, is worried that this young industry lacks a joint voice. 'There are issues with seed quality and provenance,' she said. 'We need more pressure on labelling, especially stating seed origins.' ●

www.rhs.org.uk For advice on how to establish a wildflower meadow search RHS Online for 'Wildflower'.



RHS / TIM SANDALL