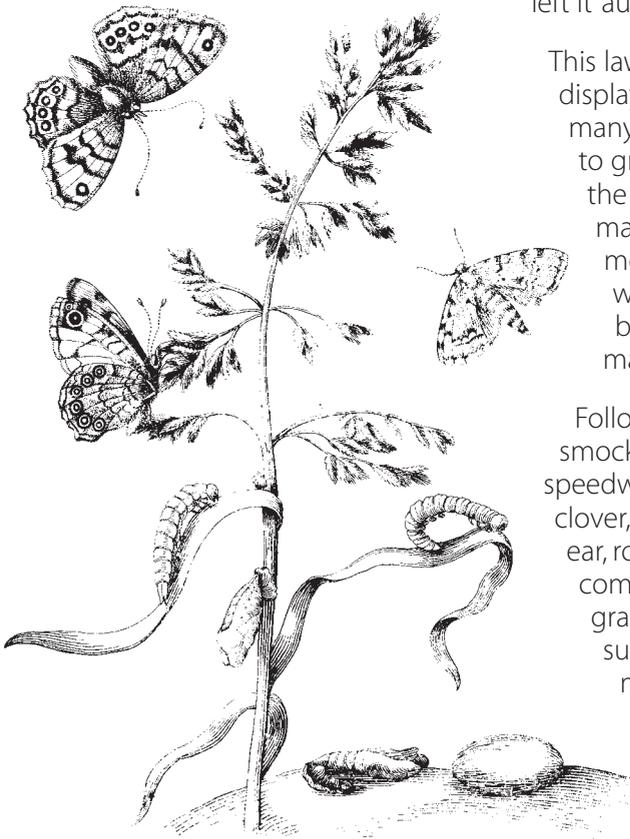


Discovering the meadow in your garden *Gilly Pollock*

Many of us long to have a wildflower meadow in our own garden to attract wildlife and to provide a softer, natural patch to more formal gardens. If this is something that appeals to you, before you rush outside to scarify the lawn and start sowing a meadow mix, perhaps you just need to find out what you already have growing in your lawn.

When we moved to a village in the rolling Monmouthshire hills, we inherited a half acre hillside garden. The land is split into three areas to fit within the landscape. Each area has some lawn but they all have their own unique characteristics. Two lawns are quite typical of a domestic garden but the third is a bit different, situated on a steep bank, covered with a carpet of moss. Many gardeners would have reached for the rake and moss killer, but I quite like a moss lawn as its lovely to walk on bare footed in the summer, so we left it 'au natural'.



This lawn provided a wonderful spring display of primroses and cowslips for many years and when the grass started to grow my husband would be out with the lawnmower. One year however, I managed to persuade him to leave the mossy lawn uncut to see what else was growing there. This decision has been one of the best I have ever made in my many years of gardening.

Following the spring flowers, came ladies smock, native bluebells, germander speedwell, pignut, bugle, selfheal, sorrel, red clover, buttercups, bird's foot trefoil, cat's ear, rough hawk bit and, in early June, common spotted orchids. A range of grasses followed through-out the summer. I was so excited that every morning I went out with a cup of tea, counting the orchids and observing the area for new flowers and grasses. Hubby was

desperate to get the lawn mower out but I persuaded him to leave it and over the years he has accepted that this lawn is now our very own natural meadow.

We are fortunate to have an excellent meadow conservation group in the area, so we invited Stephanie Tyler, Chair of Monmouthshire Meadows, to carry out a survey. Although I was excited by our meadow, I didn't think it was of any great interest, as many people have much larger meadows in the area. Much to my surprise, the survey showed that we have an area of unimproved grassland, with over 50 species of flowers and grasses in our small patch. It has over eight of the indicator plants to make it a county wildlife site. The highlight was the discovery of a broad-leaved helleborine, not the most attractive plant but one that is highly regarded by botanists. Each year the meadow becomes more colourful and we have doubled the number of orchids to 19 plants.

The meadow are two distinct areas. One has partial shade as it's under the canopy of an oak tree, whilst the other side is in full sun. This has created an even more diverse meadow area, with bluebells and buttercups out at the same time. We cut a twisting path through it, which leads you through the swathes of grasses and bobbing flower heads. I love to sit and watch the gentle breeze and the sunlight dancing on the flower heads and elegant grasses. This year we opened the garden to the public through the Monmouthshire Meadows Group Open Day, which is held in June. It was wonderful to share our modest patch with other meadow enthusiasts.

Since the discovery of our own natural meadow, my knowledge has increased and I now find this the most satisfying area of the garden. Watching a variety of species such as bees, butterflies, hoverflies, ladybirds and a range of moths and other insects makes it very worthwhile. The protection of small areas of meadows is very important to provide wildflower corridors for all insects but especially bees. Monmouthshire is home to several species of bees including the rare shrill carder bee, so I feel that I am doing my bit to support the local bee population. Leaving the meadow uncut until mid September allows time for all bees to have bred for the next season. Admittedly by this time the meadow looks pretty tired and messy, but you need to leave it until the seeds have set and the bees have dined out on their last supper.

So my advice is to let your lawn grow for one season, cut a path through it to provide a natural river flowing through and just wait - you too may have a natural meadow hidden in the soil just waiting to burst out in your garden! To find out about next year's Monmouthshire Meadows Group Open Day see www.monmouthshiremeadows.co.uk and for bee conservation look at www.bumblebeeconservation.org. If you need to enhance your meadow you can find quality plants from the nurseries featured on my website: www.britishplantnurseryguide.co.uk.