

## HUTTON WILDFLOWER SEEDS – FURTHER INFORMATION ON SEED SAVING AND MANAGEMENT

Additional notes by Alex Stuart to the web article on 'Hutton Wildflower seeds' on the Living Field web site at <http://www.livingfield.co.uk/people/hutton-wildflower-seeds-2020/>

### Seed Saving

The general idea with wildflowers in new areas is to save any management until after the flowers have passed and seeds have formed at the end of summer. The strategy on such a small scale in your garden is a bit different to that of establishing a large wildflower meadow containing lots of grasses. Once flowering has passed, you can then think about harvesting the wildflower seeds. This is another activity which you can involve small children in, and is a great way to get more wildflower seeds for free.

Wildflowers often create many hundreds of seeds, although they can be tiny in size. If you are interested in harvesting your seeds, then Growwild have some very easy to follow written steps and an informative video on how to do this, including how to dry and store seeds. Harvesting your seeds will allow you to re-seed your current wildflower area with the annuals from the mix, or you could sow another wildflower area or pass the seeds along to someone else who would be interested in doing this!

<https://www.growwilduk.com/wildflowers/how-grow-wildflowers/seed-saving>

While seed saving is encouraged, you do not specifically have to do this in order to see more flowers next year though, as the flowers will naturally drop their seeds when they are ready. Your management will really depend on how you want the area to look over winter – whether you would prefer it to look neater or are happy to let it look a bit wilder.

### Neater

Most often management involves cutting the area down to a height of around 7-10cm. The idea behind this is that it generally gives enough clearance so that you are not disturbing the perennial and biennial flowers. Perennials will keep coming back year on year, while biennials have a two-year lifecycle where they produce seeds in their second year before the plant dies. Therefore, it is important not to disturb these plants which are still growing.

When cutting the area, you want to leave the cuttings where they are for a few days at least to try and help the seeds naturally drop to the ground. This process is sometimes referred to as 'chop and drop'. While cutting, you could also shake the cuttings or rub the flower heads in your hands to help this process of releasing seeds and then press them into the soil. After a few weeks you can then remove the cuttings to achieve a tidier look and also keep the soil fertility down, which is important for wildflowers coming back year on year.

### Wilder

If you are happy for the area to look a bit 'wilder', then you can always leave some areas uncut. As well as providing interest in the look of your garden over winter, this also provides valuable habitats for overwintering insects <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/20657146.pdf> and also food sources for birds both in terms of seeds and additional insects. For example, teasel has large structural seed heads which look fantastic over winter and are a well-known food source for goldfinches.

There is a slight downside in leaving the material there in that nutrients will build up more quickly - not ideal for wildflowers which are easily outcompeted by vigorous grasses. To get around this, people often cut one part of the area one year and then alternate by then leaving that cut part to overwinter the next year, and vice versa.

The ground will also not be as 'open' the following year for seeds germinating in direct sunlight. So if you think this is the case and do need to cut back some of the old vegetation in early springtime, then try cutting

it away carefully, making a small bundle with twine and then placing it against a fence or tree to allow any overwintering insects to emerge in the warmer weather!

The hollow stems of wildflowers are often good places for beneficial insects to utilise, and this can have benefits to our gardens. The overwintering adults or eggs they have laid, will emerge before aphids and other 'pest' insects appear, and therefore may be able to help control numbers of these in gardens as they have been shown to in agriculture. References to further scientific papers on the subject:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0167880913004416>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0167880916300032>

Contact: alex.stuart@hutton.ac.uk