

What is a meadow?



Anne Wareham resolves what is meant by the term 'meadow', and why real meadows are so valuable

You will have heard more than enough lately about meadows, but then, so have I and much of what I have heard has annoyed me. Unlike other gardeners – who we know are cheerful, jolly souls who sing as they go about tweeking and weeding before frolicking energetically amongst thousands of happy bees and butterflies in their...er...meadows – I tend to get annoyed about things.

So what could possibly be annoying about such bucolic visions of happiness? The term 'meadow' perhaps? I have nothing against new uses of old words; that's the way language goes. But the uses of the word 'meadow' have now become a source of total confusion and perhaps may even bring damage in their train. Let's consider the Collins English Dictionary definition: 1. An area of grassland, often used for hay or for grazing of animals, 2. A low lying piece of grassland, often boggy and near a river.

So – a field. When people ask me what was here at Veddww when we arrived I have had a bad tendency to say 'it was just two fields'. I do know better now and I think I might hesitate a little more if I were ever faced with the possibility of making a garden from two fields again. They were actually old grassland, and I believe have been unploughed since the Napoleonic era and had briefly made every acre essential for crops. It had recently been maintained by grazing.

Still, believing that every garden needs some open space and change of pace, we have kept

some of this old pasture, and after some time of cutting the grass and removing it every year to reduce the fertility which grazing had increased, we have what you might accurately call meadows. Sometimes referred to, somewhat misleadingly, as 'wildflower' meadows – they do have a large proportion of wildflowers but also a great many fine and beautiful grasses.

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It's not at all like a mass of colourful annuals. Or even a mix of colourful perennials. Which is increasingly what the general public is beginning to believe a meadow is. The weeds of arable fields, without any crop at all, have quite captured the popular imagination and areas of varying sizes are being cleared, at considerable effort, in order to sow the seeds. I tried this some years ago and discovered that growing weeds is harder than you'd think. Imitating the action of a plough makes you realise why the plough was invented, and the way the birds feast on the seed tells you why they used to send small boys out as bird scarers. I also understand that even successful 'annual meadows' may deteriorate after two or three years for reasons that are poorly understood.

But quite apart from all that, it is highly regrettable to destroy old meadows or pastures

unnecessarily. They are a valuable, species rich part of our ecology and history and we have lost an estimated 97 per cent since the last war. They merit and need careful and informed maintenance where they still exist. I know of meadows being destroyed to make a 'flower meadow' with sowings of annual seeds, or where someone nearly destroyed their ancient meadow to create a 'Transylvanian meadow'. People strip off the existing vegetation in order to lower fertility quickly and tree planting is also seen as wonderfully worthy – while being potentially destructive.

We can't police this or the language and most of these meadows have no official protection or recognition. But we can realise their value, communicate that where possible, and be clearer ourselves about what we mean by a 'meadow'.

ABOUT ANNE WAREHAM



Anne Wareham's book, *The Bad Tempered Gardener* is the story of the creation with her husband, Charles Hawes, of their garden in the Welsh

borders, the Veddww. Anne also writes for the *Telegraph*, garden magazines and her own blog on the Veddww website, www.veddww.com. She is editor of www.thinkinggardens.co.uk.