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MANAGING URBAN GREEN SPACE FOR WILDLIFE

Wildlife seed mixes for parks and gardens

Based on agricultural wild bird seed mixtures and 'pictorial meadows', wildlife seed mixes have been tailored to benefit a wide variety of wildlife while simultaneously being attractive to users of parks, green spaces and private gardens.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE

Wildlife seed mixes provide a variety of plants attractive to insects, particularly caterpillars and other larvae, beetles and bugs. The flowers can also attract a variety of nectar-feeding insects such as bees, butterflies and hoverflies.

These mixes provide abundant insect and seed food for birds during summer and winter.

The thin sowing means the vegetation is of an open nature, making it easier for birds and other wildlife to forage for invertebrates.

The variety of bright colours displayed by the flowers means they are generally well received by park users, and may provide welcome variation to a conventional garden border. It will still be necessary to inform park users about the work beforehand to alleviate any concerns.



HOW CAN I CREATE AND MANAGE A WILDLIFE SEED MIX?

Preparation and management

The area needed can be comparatively small from 0.1 to 0.05 of a hectare, which is ideal for small green spaces. The mix can also be sown in gardens in an area as small as 2 to 4 m².

Seed mixes are best grown in sunny locations, adjacent to deciduous shrubby cover, particularly where birds have been observed to favour foraging and shelter.

Spring sowing (late March through April) is recommended, although dry weather can cause problems with germination and establishment. Therefore, watering and weeding may sometimes be necessary.

Clear any vegetation, and cultivate to leave a clean seed bed. It may be advantageous to allow the plot to lay fallow for 10 to 14 days and repeat the cultivation to further remove any weeds.

Rake the bed to an even finish and sow the seed mix. In parks and green spaces there will be two separate sowings. Sow the centre of the plot with the 'wildlife seed' element of the mix. Follow this by sowing the 'cornfield annuals' around the outer facing perimeters of the plot, but avoid leaving a hard defined edge between the two sowings. See Table 1 for species and sowing rates.

For the cornfield annuals, try to source seeds of native provenance. Some species, for example cornflower, are substituted for non-native varieties and cultivars – see www.floralocale.org.

The seeds may be mixed with sand or other inert material in order to help give an even sowing.

Once sown, roll the bed and apply standard NPK fertiliser only to the centre of the plot containing the 'wildlife seed' (see Table 1).

Table 1. Suggested seed mixes, sowing and fertiliser rates.

'Wildlife seed' @ 8g/m ² ; NPK @ 10g/m ²	Cornfield annuals* @ 4g/m ² ; NPK - none
Linseed	Corn chamomile
Triticale	Corn marigold
Barley	Corn cockle
Phacelia	Cornflower
White millet	Field poppy
Sunflower	Scentless mayweed
	White campion

*check native provenance

At a garden scale, it is not practical to separate the mixes and they will be easier supplied as one, sown at 12 g/m².

It may be beneficial to stagger sowing where practical. For example, in a garden situation, sowing half the mix and the other half a fortnight later might prolong flowering and help compensate for any frost damage to earlier seedlings.

In late winter/early spring remove any remaining stems, plant-litter and debris, and repeat the cultivation and sowing process.

Limitations

Mixes contain non-natives, so be clear what you want in your park and ensure this is not likely to compromise any adjacent high value habitats.

While highly beneficial for wildlife and attractive to people, these beds are resource demanding on labour and material cost as they have to be established annually.

Although not essential, some green space managers may want to fence the areas off. Options include post and rope, post and wire or chestnut pale, but all entail extra cost.

KEY POINTS

- Wildlife seed mixes are attractive options for seed-eating birds that also rely on insects to feed chicks during summer.
- They can be grown in comparatively small patches, adjacent to dense cover frequented by birds.
- They are aesthetically appealing to the public. Ensure adequate interpretation and explanation in advance and throughout their lifetime.
- They can be prone to drought and weed competition during establishment and have to be renewed annually.

See also the RSPB Advisory Sheet on:

- *Managing urban green space for wildlife* (A2 folded poster sheet)
- *Managing urban green space for wildlife – formal and informal grassland*
- *Managing urban green space for wildlife – formal and informal tree, shrub and flower borders*
- *Managing urban green space for wildlife – creating and managing flower-rich grassland in parks and green spaces*
- *Managing urban green space for wildlife – House Sparrow*
- *Building space for wildlife* (A2 folded poster sheet RSPB-Kier)



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