

# Five easy-to-grow wetland wildflowers for habitat creation

Growing native plants from local, wild seeds or cuttings is a great way to maintain the genetic diversity of our native flora. Using commercial sources risks diminishing this. So, whether you're planning to create habitat on a small or large scale, we'd encourage you to look at growing plants using wild seed or cuttings sourced from the surrounding landscape.

To get you started, we've chosen five wetland flowers which are valuable for wildlife and simple to grow. Except for Water Mint, all these are best grown from seed, which should be sown fresh onto damp, peat-free compost in trays; either a general purpose or seedling formulation will do. Gently press seed into the compost but don't bury. Keep the compost permanently moist but don't flood. When large enough to handle, seedlings should be pricked-out and transferred individually into small plug trays, then later into larger plugs or pots: we start with 3 cm diameter plug trays then transfer to 8 or 9 cm pots or large plug trays. Growing plants need nutrients: the base fertiliser added to commercial compost will suffice for seedlings and small plants but we add roughly 5 or 6 slow-release fertiliser pellets to a 9 cm plug and twice that amount to a 1 litre pot. A 50/50 mix of 3-month and 12-month formulations works well.

As a general guide, sowing seed in summer should produce plants ready to plant-out in autumn of the next year but you should always check that a vigorous, well-developed rootball has developed.

When collecting seed or cuttings, always obtain permission from the land owner or manager (this is a legal requirement if you are removing roots or stolons). Sites of Special Scientific Interest are best avoided because the land owner will have to seek consent from Natural England on your behalf, even for small quantities of seed.

Take care to only remove a small proportion of seedheads of any species. Collect in paper or cotton bags and, if possible, give invertebrates an opportunity to escape. Spread seed or seedheads on a tray at home so they can air-dry to prevent mould but don't keep them in direct sunlight – desiccation can kill seeds or trigger dormancy.

## **Ragged Robin *Silene flos-cuculi***

*Our tip: an ideal plant for beginners*

One of the best-known wildflowers of fen-meadows and ditch banks, Ragged Robin is very simple to grow from either fresh or dried seed. Seed capsules are usually present in July; leave them in a paper bag to dry out and drop the seeds.

This is fairly fast-growing plant, so sowing fresh seed in summer should provide plants ready to plant-out the following spring. Ragged Robin is shallow-rooted, so young plants need to be handled with care.

## Water Mint *Mentha aquatica*

*Our tip: grow from rooted sections of runners*

Water Mint is a versatile plant of wet ground or shallow water, attracting a profusion of insects to its flowers in high summer. While Water Mint can be grown from seed, it's easiest to propagate by cutting up rooted pieces of stolon (runner) and planting them in pots. Cut into sections which have roots growing on at least two nodes (see photo below). Plant out when the root ball is well-developed, which should take only a few months if potted-up during the growing season.

Grown in a polytunnel, Water Mint often becomes infested with root aphids. This seems to be less of a problem outside.



Sections of Water Mint stolon ready for potting-up

## Kingcup *Caltha palustris*

*Our tip: sow seed as fresh as possible*

Kingcup, or Marsh Marigold is an iconic wildflower of marshy grassland. Our monitoring suggests that it survives well in fen creation plots. This species can be difficult to grow from bought seed but germinates easily from **very fresh** seed. The trick is to collect seed pods which are just beginning to split: in North Yorkshire, this is usually in mid to late June. Leave any later and the seed will be gone!



Young Kingcup plants in the nursery

## Greater Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus pedunculatus*

*Our tip: break down the hard seed-coat by sandpapering before sowing*

Greater Bird's-foot Trefoil is a taller, more robust version of Common Bird's-foot Trefoil and grows on damp soils. It's an ideal species for wet meadows or upper pond banks.

Ripe (brown) seed pods can be collected in July and August and split open to remove the seeds. Like many legumes, germination is greatly increased by sandpapering the fresh seed to remove the hard outer coat. Sow thinly onto peat-free compost and keep permanently moist but do not flood.

## Purple Loosestrife *Lythrum salicaria*

*Our tip: mix the very fine seed with sand to avoid sowing too densely*

Purple Loosestrife grows very easily from seed, which can be shaken from the heads in late summer (typically in September). The seed is very fine, making it easy to over-sow. Pricking out a dense mass of seedlings then becomes difficult. Instead, sow thinly by mixing with sand on the surface of damp compost.

You can also sow Purple Loosestrife directly onto a roughly-cultivated seedbed created by raking or harrowing. Simply shake the seedheads or strew over the ground. Seedheads of Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, Wild Angelica *Angelica sylvestris*, Fleabane *Pulicaria dysenterica* and Yellow Flag *Iris pseudacorus* can be strewn at the same time to create a colourful mixture of high summer wetland flowers – but be patient, some will not flower for two or three years.



Fen creation at Nosterfield has been generously supported by Yorkshire Water's Biodiversity Fund as part of the Lower Ure Conservation Trust's project to expand priority habitats.



<https://www.luct.org.uk/>