



Bejewelling THE GARDEN

This month designer Arne Maynard is planning a wildflower meadow, as well as a flowery mead.

IT'S A wonderful sunny, early spring morning and I've just been for a walk up the ancient droveway which winds up the bank opposite my home. This magical, carved out, cobbled track used to be the medieval road to Chepstow. The snowdrops are pushing their delicate heads through the leaves on the mossy verges and the Hamamelis are beginning to flower. At the bottom of the bank my home, Allt-y-bela, is an Elizabethan tower house set in a green valley of pastures and woodland.

This time of year always fills me with enthusiasm: the whole garden is awakening and beginning to blossom again. It's the perfect time to plan ahead and think about what needs to be done in the garden.

I am planting a flowery mead around the house, like those seen in Elizabethan tapestries and paintings. The native grasses and perennials in the mead will then bleed into native meadow planting close to the boundaries of the garden, and on into the fields beyond, linking the house to the surrounding pastures.

The garden sits in such a natural setting and it wouldn't feel right to have manicured lawns or herbaceous borders. Instead I am going to have fun creating a 'curiosity cabinet' of species plants among native grasses. I will also have more time to spend in my vegetable and cutting garden rather than mowing stripes into lawns. My meadow will only need cutting twice a year.

Last year we spent the winter and spring contouring the garden into gentle, undulating terraced banks and carving out pathways from low to high points. These changes in level and gentle slopes have enabled us to create different areas within the garden with different atmospheres and functions, yet still linking together harmoniously - creating a garden that 'holds hands' with the surrounding landscape.

Whilst carrying out the earthworks we harvested the topsoil from the areas where I planned to create my wild flower meadow and flowery mead. The topsoil was used to enrich the kitchen garden soil to create a lovely deep rich loam, ideal for vegetables. The subsoil left behind will now provide a perfect medium for wild flowers and grasses, as it is not too rich. It has no residual nitrates as chemicals have not been used on the land.

As well as having the right soil for the wild grasses and flowers it is also very important to choose the right grass. We seeded the contoured banks and flatter areas close to the house last May with a mix of native grasses. We chose varieties that are not too dominant, enabling wild flowers and selected flowering plants to establish without too much competition. Despite the weather's best efforts to wash away the seeded grass there is now a low green carpet, from which I have selectively weeded out the docks and thistles. These vigorous species would quickly take hold if they weren't selected out.

On some of the banks we also planted some species bulbs last autumn. These are now coming through, promising a carpet of colour made up of *Narcissus lobularis*, *Fritillaria*, white *Camassia* and a sprinkling of black Tulips. To add to this I need to work quickly now to plant my chosen flowering plants to join the mix and create the haze of flower heads that I envisage. It is rather like weaving a tapestry of grasses and flowers.

Close to the house clusters of topiary Yew and Beech introduce more formality and it is here that I want to have denser plantings of perennials amongst the grass. A lattice of cobbled paths criss-crosses the grass and will create narrow walkways as the grass and flowers grow up. They are slightly concave, acting also as drainage channels for surface water to run towards the stream.

To create the flowery mead, I am using a selected palette of plants that have become commonly known as



herbaceous perennials. They actually grow wild in damp meadows, and I want to reintroduce them into their natural environment here at Allt-y-bela. I love these plants and there is a large selection to choose from but I have kept my choice to a minimum to give more impact.

I have chosen rich colours of *Astrantia*, *Aquilegia*, *Geranium phaeum* and *Pulsatilla*, contrasting these with the strong yellow of double buttercups. The Elizabethans loved double flowers and there are already buttercups in the fields surrounding the house. I am also going to use a *Lilium pyrenaicum*, which is a lovely yellow Turk's Cap lily, and *Fritillaria camschatcensis*, with its deep rich chocolatey bell-shaped flowers. A few of these gems will be like a golden thread running through the tapestry. Alternatively you could use *Lilium martagon* if you have a grassy area that is in dappled shade.

Not only will I keep the number of varieties to a minimum but I will try not to plant too densely. The flowers need the foil of the grass, so in the mead area the proportion will be about 30-40% flowers. As well as the perennials I will indulge my passion for species plants, adding some stars to the tapestry as special gems.

Now is the perfect time of year to plant young plants. If you can get hold of them I recommend planting young bare root material, as they take much better when they can grow straight into the soil rather than having to reach beyond rich compost when pot grown. Alternatively plugs are also excellent as they will root out quickly into the soil.

Beyond the mead, towards the boundaries, I am sowing an indigenous wild flower meadow mix so that the boundaries between field and garden are blurred. To ensure I have as good a match as possible I am going to collect hay from the surrounding fields in midsummer, before the flower seeds have fully ripened. I will prepare my meadow area first by cutting the established grass quite short, then loosely raking it, then spreading an even layer of the collected green hay over it. As the seed ripens within the hay it will drop to the ground and grow, replicating the flora of the fields some 50 yards away. This seed will thrive as it's growing in the same conditions as the fields, creating a seamless join



Photography: GAP Photos/Jonathan Buckley



between the garden and surrounding fields. As these native plants grow, insects will be drawn into the garden and benefit from an extended habitat.

It is possible to use a native wildflower seed mix from a supplier if you can't get local hay with flowerheads. However, this tends to be a generic mix of common species, which doesn't necessarily match the flowers in the immediate environment.

In the boundary meadow areas I am also going to add a few of the perennial plants from the flowery mead, such as *Astrantia* and *Aquilegia*. It will look as if they have seeded into the meadow, dissolving the line between the areas. In reverse I will happily allow seed from the meadow flowers to grow within the mead.

The process of establishing meadow grass and flowers within it takes a large amount of time and patience but is enormously satisfying. You can do it on any scale, even in a small garden or orchard area. The selection of flowering plants can create a mood: for example I would use *Geranium* 'Kashmir White', white *Camassia*, white *martagon* Lilies and a white *Aquilegia* to give a cool, sophisticated look. The secret is to look at the plants that thrive in a native meadow environment and then choose the ones that grow in conditions similar to your garden. For example *Asters* grow naturally in the wild grasslands in America and can be seen in long grass alongside motorway verges in this country. They would be great in a meadow mix for late season flowers. Ideally select species plants rather than hybrids as they will tend to establish better. ■

Arne is running a 'Creating Wild Flower Meadows' course on Tuesday April 21 at Allt-y-bela. It is one in a series of year-round garden courses. To find out more or to book a place, visit www.arne-maynard.com or call 020 7689 8100.

The topsoil was used to enrich the kitchen garden soil to create a lovely deep rich loam, ideal for vegetables.

Top left: Double buttercup
Top: xxxxxxx
Above left: Aquilegia purple in grass.
Above: *Astrantia major* 'Claret'.