

Robert Harvey - photographer "british wild flowers in nature and the garden. "

As a chartered natural scientist and an associate of the Royal Photographic Society, Robert Harvey treated us to a tour of wild flowers in British habitats, including meadows, limestone and chalk downlands, woodlands, ponds and the coast. He reminded us of the delicate beauty of many of our native wild flowers such as the dwarf mallow and meadow cranesbill. If you want to see snake's head fritillary in its natural habitat, you will find 80% of the wild population in one field outside the village of Cricklade in North Wiltshire. They are usually at their best in the second and third week of April, although it is worth contacting Aidan Fallon, Reserve Manager on 07919 995036 before you visit. Wild flower meadows exist where the land is low in nutrients and is farmed sympathetically with no artificial fertilisers, where cattle graze and the hay is cut and removed. To replicate this in our gardens we only need to kill existing grass and rotavate if the area hasn't been regularly fed, but if the soil is rich and well fed you would need to remove the top soil before sowing a wildflower meadow seed mix. Many of these seed mixes contain 80% wild grasses and 20% perennial wild flowers, so unless you also sow some annual wild flowers, you will have to wait until the second year before your meadow starts to bloom.

We then travelled on to the downlands to see flamboyant blue viper's bugloss, yellow-wort, a variety of orchids and the exotic pasque flower, rare in the wild but well suited to the Chilterns. Robert's first attempt to bring chalk downs to a garden was to stack old paving slabs and cover with grit, soil with added lime to replicate the thin, well drained alkaline soil. He felt that a lack of grazing rabbits was a contributing factor to the failure of this attempt. We moved on to the woodlands starting with the texture of mixed woods canopy then being warned about leaving our yew hedges too long with an example of the dark canopy and gnarled trunks of the most ancient yew grove in Britain. Amongst the deciduous woods we found snowdrops, wood anemone, woodland buttercup and of course the bluebell. Although a beech wood is rather large for most gardens, silver birch, field maple, rowan and hazel are alternatives that will attract birds as will the alternative of a hedge of 11 different species providing interest with flower and fruit at different times through the year. If you do have room, an ancient oak supports more insects and wildlife than any other plant.

Ponds provide a plethora of habitat for fauna and flora. For the wild look, it is better to dig an irregular shape, while differing depths provides the conditions favoured by a variety of plants. Beware the white water lily that will swamp your pond, the yellow water lily is much better behaved while, for those of us with a stream in our garden, water crowfoot enjoys moving water. Bog gardens can provide colour and variety through the year, starting with cowslips and marsh marigold in the spring time, then ragged robin, marsh bird's foot trefoil and on to wild carrot in August.

Finally we visited the coast to the flower rich dune slacks filled with mullion and sea buckthorn, to the shingle beach with sea kale, thrift, yellow horned poppy and sea campion then to the Norfolk salt marshes where the sea lavender carpets the muddy banks. If you want to build your own beach garden, just dig a hole and fill with shingle, sand and compost, plant up with the coastal plant of your choice and mulch with shingle or sea pebbles. Et voila.

Robert challenged us re-evaluate the position of the wild flower in a tame garden. A well chosen group of perennial wild flowers can look as good as a herbaceous border.

You will find more of Robert's photographs on wildlife, landscapes and the night sky at <http://www.naturalworldphotography.net/>.