

THE FIELD was a tangle of undergrowth six feet high, made up almost entirely of brambles and nettles; but it was in the sun all day long and it offered superb views over the surrounding countryside. If no one else loved this field, perhaps this was our chance to increase the local biodiversity and leave a tiny corner of Britain more beautiful than we found it.

The first task was to discover who owned this piece of land, so a letter was despatched to the Land Registry, and when the reply came we approached the owner with an offer to buy the field. Unfortunately he was not prepared to sell; but he was happy to rent the field to us for a peppercorn rent, recognising that he would reap the benefit of someone else hacking through the undergrowth and trying to tame his unruly land. We knew that this arrangement meant we would have no rights to the field and might find ourselves putting in a lot of work and a certain amount of investment with no guarantee that it would not be claimed back; but we decided that it is sometimes necessary to exercise blind trust, and we were keen to start work.

Firmly rejecting the well-meaning advice we were given that 'What you need to use is Round-up', we set to work on cutting down the brambles. We hired a tractor from a local farmer, which topped a large part of the field, so that at least we could find our way in. This was probably necessary at this stage, but I was not happy about compacting the earth with the heavy tractor wheels, and wondered what life might have been threatened by the exercise. A few weeks later a friend brought his much lighter tractor to plough the bit we had cleared; and from then on it has been up to us to make what progress we can, using forks and clippers, gardening gloves, a strimmer and lots of muscle.

We introduced new wild flowers by gradually clearing and sowing zones, on the basis that we could then leave the flowers to seed themselves more widely in future years. This worked well, as it meant we did not have to work at too large an area all at once, and within months of starting the project we had wonderful colourful swathes of wild flowers. There appeared to be a good and attractive range of grasses already, so we concentrated on introducing suitable wild flowers that would be at home in the area.

One of the potential difficulties of the site was that the soil is incredibly rich – in fact there used to be a slurry heap there – and wildflower meadows need poor soil otherwise the grasses outperform the flowers, with disappointing results. We decided to tackle this by depleting the soil through growing vegetables. The proof

of the rich soil was not long in coming: I threw down some pumpkin seeds that I'd saved from a meal the previous Autumn, and was rewarded a few months later with 100 pumpkins. Soon the larder shelves were groaning with jars of pumpkin jam, the freezer was stacked with soup and other tasty pumpkin dishes, and all our friends and relations were busy eating their way through our bumper harvest. Fortunately Hallowe'en brought a lively demand, but by the time November dawned, friends and family were beginning to run away if they saw us arriving with yet another pumpkin gift.

There were plenty of surprises that first year. The meadow woke up from its winter slumber much earlier than we expected, and we were greeted with carpets of snowdrops. Before January was out we found primroses, heliotrope, campion and ground ivy, and these were soon followed by cowslips, celandines, violets and a wide range of daffodils: apparently flowers used to be grown there for market years ago. As we have moved on through this first year of cultivation, the number of species has grown at each visit. We have introduced some flowers that have been seriously in decline in recent years, including the corn cockle which seems to have settled very happily into the meadow.

In terms of fauna, badgers take a short cut across the meadow and hares cavort through the grass and nibble the top third of most of our beetroots – which I'm quite happy to share with them. We intentionally kept plenty of nettle

patches – which would probably be impossible to eliminate anyway – for the butterflies, and we allow flowers and grasses to go to seed to feed the birds. We have been rewarded with the sound of birdsong and the constant colour and movement of countless butterflies and moths.

We positioned a plank in an old sink of rainwater to provide a safe watering hole for mammals; small tunnels and tracks have appeared through the foliage; and something is camping in the small cairn igloo we built with stones dug from the vegetable bed. The only sounds are the wind in the trees, the mew of buzzards and chatter of birds, and the bleating of sheep in the surrounding fields.

There is plenty of work still to be done in the coming years, and we shall continue to develop our muscles and learn more about wildlife. There is no doubt that the biodiversity of the area is richer and more varied than it was when the field was a nettle and bramble patch, and we have reaped enormous enjoyment from the project.

Oh, and if anyone has any more exciting recipes for pumpkin, do please let me know.

## Creating a wildflower meadow



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