

Designer and horticulturalist **Lauren Tyler** makes the case for bringing more wildflowers into mainstream cultivation

CALL OF THE WILD

This spring, garden centres and wholesalers will be promoting 'garden-worthy' plants, using colourful point-of-sale material to entice the customer. Alongside this, print and online media, TV gardening programmes and flower shows will inform people of plant trends and specific styles. These two factors greatly affect our clients' plant preferences and designers are expected to implement these choices into their designs.

If this retail and media promotion works so well for garden-worthy plants, why can't the same methods be used to promote some of Britain's most threatened plants?

A large number of native wildflowers are becoming rarer by the day, some are extinct and many are classed as 'critically endangered', 'near threatened' or 'vulnerable'. It is of course illegal to pick or dig up any wild plant without the landowner's permission, and it is also an offence to take plants for commercial use without authorisation. Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act gives special protection to critically endangered plants and this includes 11 native orchids, some having great potential for ornamental use.

I realise this is not an easy or a quick process, and that work needs to be done to increase natural populations of plants, as well as nursery stock. However, there is a precedent – the Wollemi pine in Australia was recently discovered (1994) after having been considered extinct and was propagated vegetatively from seeds taken from the wild. There were only 40 trees in two separate sites at Wollemi National Park, Queensland, in 1998, and after a gradual increase in numbers it was made available to retail outlets worldwide. In this case, it has been proved that commercially releasing propagated plants to the public can help raise awareness and funds to help manage the wild plant collections – a model that could be applied to other threatened species.

Some of our most popular native species are widely available in large retail outlets, such as field poppies, cowslip and foxglove, but not enough is done to make them stand out. Colour co-ordinated pots, posters and suggesting planting combinations, which are widely used for non-natives, would all help convince customers. Obviously there are species that are not as decorative and may not have the potential for general garden use, but there are many that are just waiting to be noticed. Cow parsley, for example, has been seen at Chelsea in the past few years and been given real fashionable appeal because of its wild looking, informal appearance, giving successful juxtaposition with modern, contemporary themes.

But, in general, wild plants are greatly under utilised and sometimes there are good reasons. Scientists at Kew have been involved with the propagation and reintroduction into the wild of the rare Lady's slipper orchid, which was previously widespread on limestone grassland. Unfortunately, this large and exotic looking orchid is unsuitable for the retail market because of it being too

difficult to propagate. Yet several varieties of British orchids are much more suitable for the garden environment, including *Dactylorhiza* (marsh orchids), *Epipactis* (helleborines) and the *Orchis* genera. Likewise, corn buttercup, field gentian, henbane, frogbit and eyebright (found nowhere else in the world) are declining in numbers and could be considered as suitable candidates, eventually, for mainstream cultivation.

There are seed mixtures available commercially that give promise of injecting flowering natives into our gardens too. These include Pictorial Meadows seed mixes trialled by Nigel Dunnett at the University of Sheffield, which claim to be without the usual problems associated with the creation of meadows – unreliable germination, short flowering season, untidy appearance, the need to sow on low fertility soils, and so on. However, these seeds are part native, part non-native and described as 'not suitable for conservation mixes in rural areas outside garden boundaries'. They focus more on creating the meadow effect and, although they do make a positive contribution (by attracting insects and

wildlife), they do not serve as an aid for conservation.

Happily it is not too late. The Millennium Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place has collected and banked all of the UK's native flora, so these plants could be

re-cultivated and reintroduced – possibly into garden use. It just needs the will of the horticultural trade and perhaps a 'push' from garden designers who create the trends.

More work needs to be done to find out which endangered or nationally scarce wildflowers could be made viable for commercial use. Conservation charity Plantlife's programme, Back from the Brink, has a species dossier and website links that give an idea of the types of plants that may be good candidates. Having already lost valuable landscapes laden with these beautiful plants, each inhabiting a niche within their habitat, I can't think of a more timely solution – to analyse the green space we have left and to use (when possible) plants whose origins are from a similar habitat.

Our native wildflowers are decorative, varied and unique in appearance and have the potential to be woven into the design of a garden. They are suited to all sorts of sites, soils and conditions, giving them practical suitability and realistic potential. As designers we must encourage people to create gardens that are stylish, well designed spaces that also provide environmental benefit. ▣

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