

Collecting seed from wildflowers

Legislation under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) makes it illegal “to uproot any wild plant without permission from the landowner or occupier” in Britain. The term ‘uproot’ is defined as “to dig up or otherwise remove the plant from the land on which it is growing”. Picking parts of a plant (leaves, flower stems, fruit and seed) is therefore OK, as long as you don’t remove or uproot the whole plant.

General rules

Seed gathering

- Only collect seed from plants that are not rare and where they are locally abundant. Always make sure you leave some seed.
- Minimise trampling of plants as much as possible.
- If possible, do not remove the seedhead of plants when gathering the seed. Seedheads can provide important habitat for overwintering invertebrates.
- Dry weather is usually best to collect seed as seeds will be loose in pods and can be more easily collected.

Seed storing

- Seed is best kept in paper bags. Unlike plastic, paper doesn’t lock in moisture, so seed can become or remain dry, helping it to keep longer.
- Store seed where temperatures remain relatively constant, and in dry conditions e.g. in a drawer at home. Avoid basements (if damp) and garden sheds.

May

Cuckoo flower *Cardamine pratensis*

Conservation status – UK

Common

How to identify

C. pratensis is a perennial growing to 0.5 m by 0.3 m. Often seen on roadside verges and in damp grassland.

How to collect the seeds

Flowering from March to June, seeds are ripe from May to July. Seeds occur in thin pods that point upwards at the top of the stem. Carefully open the pods along the seam on one side, as you would a pea pod, and remove the seeds. Seeds are greeny-brown/brown when ripe.



Common primrose *Primula vulgaris*

Conservation status – UK

Common

How to identify

P. vulgaris is a perennial growing to 0.3 m by 0.3 m. Seen in deciduous woodland, roadside verges and old grassland.



How to collect the seeds

Flowering from December to May, seeds are ripe from April to August. Open the seed pods and extract seeds. Seeds are brown when ripe.



Dandelion *Taraxacum agg.* (a complex of 232 species)

Conservation status – UK

Common

How to identify

A perennial growing to 0.5 m by 0.3 m. Occurs in a wide variety of grassy places, especially in the years following soil disturbance.



How to collect the seeds

Flowering from April to May, seeds are ripe from May to June. When stems have a plume of simple white hairs forming a 'clock', this indicates that the seeds are ready. Seeds can be easily collected by pulling the white plumes.



June

Red campion *Silene dioica*

Conservation status – UK

Common

How to identify

S. dioica is a biennial/perennial growing to 1 m by 0.3 m. Occurring in woodland clearings and rides, hedgerows and other lightly shaded places.

How to collect the seeds

Flowering from May to July, seeds are ripe from June to August. Ripe seeds occur loose in a brown 'capsule' at the end of the stem.



Other common members of this genus, including **ragged robin** *Silene flos-cuculi* (fens, marshes, etc.) and **white campion** *Silene latifolia* (arable fields, waste ground, etc.) also produce capsules from which seeds can be gathered in the same way. Ripe seeds from both *S. flos-cuculi* and *S. latifolia* can be more reliably collected from July to October.



July

Yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*

Conservation status – UK

Locally abundant

How to identify

R. minor is an annual growing to 0.5 m. Occurs in unimproved, rough grassland, including fens and meadows. Also commonly found as an introduced species in planted wildflower meadows, due to its beneficial effect of suppressing grasses.

How to collect the seeds

Flowering from May to August, seeds are ripe from July to September. The inflated calyx that surrounds the yellow flower turns brown and seeds can be found to 'rattle' loose inside and are easily collected by tipping the calyx upside down.



Sweet cicely *Myrrhis odorata*

Conservation status – UK

Common (in the N)

How to identify

M. odorata is a perennial growing to 1 m by 1 m. Occurs on roadside verges and other grassy places. Plant has an aniseed-like aroma.



How to collect the seeds

Flowering from May to June, seeds are ripe from July to August. Ripe seeds occur as shiny, dark brown pods that point upwards, at the top of the stem.



Meadow vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis*

Conservation status – UK

Common

How to identify

L. pratensis is a perennial growing to 1.2 m. Occurs in grassy places, hedge-bottoms and scrub, avoiding very dry soils. Perhaps most easily distinguished from other similar looking members of the same family by the large, pointy stipules at bases of the leaf stalks.

How to collect the seeds

Flowering from May to August, seeds are ripe from July to September. When pods have turned from green to very dark brown (and crispy), seeds are generally ripe, being brown/green-brown.



Seeds from other common members of this family that produce pods, such as **tufted vetch** *Vicia cracca* and **common bird's-foot trefoil** *Lotus corniculatus*, can be collected in the same way. August and September are more reliable months for ripe seeds from *L. corniculatus*.



Lesser trefoil *Trifolium dubium*

Conservation status – UK

Common

How to identify

T. dubium is an annual growing to 0.5 m. Occurs in short turf and disturbed ground, generally on dry soils, common in lawns. Often mistaken for black medick *Medicago lupulina* but does not have a toothed tip to the leaf (whereas *M. lupulina* does).



How to collect the seeds

Flowering from May to October, seeds are ripe from July to October. When flowers have turned brown and are easily removed, very small seeds can be removed by rolling flowers between the fingers tips, seeds will soon become loose and fall. Seeds are light brown/brown when ripe.



Seeds from other common members of the family with a similar clover-like flower form, such as *M. lupulina*, white clover *T. repens* and red clover *T. pratense*, can be gathered in the same way.



August

Common knapweed *Centaurea nigra*

Conservation status – UK

Common

How to identify

C. nigra is a perennial growing to 0.6 m. Occurs in all types of rough grassland, often on damp or heavy soils, including verges, field borders and old meadows. May be mistaken for a thistle, but leaves nor stem are spiky.

How to collect the seeds

Flowering from June to September, seeds are ripe from August to October. Once the seed head has dried (and flower petals have turned brown), pull the petals out and seeds should pour out. Seeds are light brown when ripe.



Seeds from the close relative, **cornflower** *C. cyanus*, a common annual component of sown wildflower meadows, can be collected in the same way.



Hedge woundwort *Stachys sylvatica*

Conservation status – UK

Common

How to identify

S. sylvatica is a perennial growing to 0.9 m. Occurs in woodland, hedge bottoms, and other shady places on moist, fertile soils; also a garden 'weed'. *S. sylvatica* has particularly large leaves relative to other dead nettles.

How to collect the seeds

Flowering from July to August, seeds are ripe from August to September. The calyx of each flower, which have five long, triangular teeth, contain four black seeds (when ripe). Once calyx is removed from plant, squeeze the back and seeds will fall out.



Viper's bugloss *Echium vulgare*

Conservation status – UK

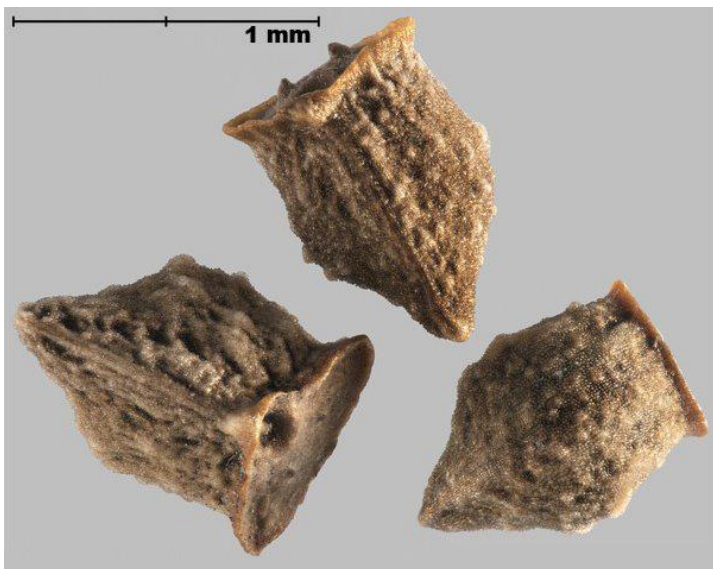
Common

How to identify

E. vulgare is a biennial/perennial growing to 0.9 m. Occurs in grassland and bare, disturbed ground on dry soils on sand, chalk and limestone; verges, old pits, heaths, field margins, waste ground, dunes and sandy shingle.

How to collect the seeds

Flowering from July to October, seeds are ripe from August to October. Seeds are brown/dark brown when ripe. They can be easily seen in the calyx as sets of four. Similar to *S. sylvatica*, seeds can be removed from the calyx by pinching its back end when it is removed from the plant. You may want gloves as it's a wee bit spiky!



Wild carrot *Daucus carota*

Conservation status – UK

Common

How to identify

D. carota is a biennial growing to 0.6 m to 0.3 m. Occurs in rough grassland , verges and scrub, especially on dry, chalky soils. Large, finely divided bracts occur beneath the flower whorl. A central flower within the whorl is present, often a reddish-purple.

How to collect the seeds

Flowering from June to August, seeds are ripe from August to September. When the flower whorl has turned brown and is folded inwards, like a 'fist', seeds can be picked off from the tips of the flower stalks ('rays')



Meadow cranesbill *Geranium pratense*

Conservation status – UK

Locally common

How to identify

G. pratense is a biennial growing to 0.6 m to 0.3 m. Occurs in rough grassland on verges, banks, stream- and riversides, mostly on damp, lime-rich soils, also unimproved meadows and pastures.

How to collect the seeds

Flowering from June to September, seeds are ripe from August to September. Once the flowering has finished, a fruit stalk (or 'crane's bill') forms, which points upwards. At the base of the stalk lie the seeds, held within the sepals. They can be collected by pinching them from the sepals. Seeds must be collected within the window between when they have turned brown and when they are catapulted for dispersal when the stalk splits.

