

Twelve Wildflowers to Pick: Frequently Asked Questions

For many people it can feel fundamentally wrong to pick wild flowers. That a conservation charity should suggest otherwise might come as a surprise. Here we hope to answer some of your questions about why it's OK to occasionally gather a small handful of flowers from twelve of our most common and abundant species.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. Why is a plant conservation charity encouraging people to pick wild flowers? Surely that's fundamentally wrong?
2. Surely children can enjoy and learn about wildflowers without picking them? People have apps, phones, Blue Planet and all sorts of places they can learn about nature....you don't have to take a penguin home from the zoo to learn more about it so why do you need to take wild flowers home?
3. Can't you just look at wildflowers where they are and leave them for others to enjoy?
4. But surely it's illegal to pick any wild flowers? They're not your property to pick and you can't just trespass onto anyone's land to pick flowers.
5. Picking has caused the extinction of some plants and 1-in-5 flowers are under threat of extinction yet you're now encouraging people to go out and pick them. Surely that completely contradicts what you are trying to do as a conservation charity?
6. I love seeing wild flowers like primroses pop up in my area and I would be upset and even angry if I saw people picking them. You could almost say it was selfish or vandalism?
7. Shouldn't we leave wildflowers to set seed? Surely picking them will lead to fewer wildflowers in the future?
8. Shouldn't we leave wildflowers for pollinating bees, butterflies and other pollinating insects? Surely picking them will impact on their survival?
9. You run a road verge campaign asking councils not to cut down flowers too early in the year but wait until they set seed, but here you are telling people to pick flowers in spring.
10. Which flowers are on your list of 12 and how did you choose them?

1. Why is a plant conservation charity encouraging people to pick wild flowers? Surely that's fundamentally wrong?

Why is it wrong? Actually, we are very comfortable with our children picking wild flowers like dandelions we know are not threatened. Some are so abundant we call them 'weeds'. All Plantlife is doing this summer is adding to that knowledge of wild flowers that aren't threatened and can be picked.

For many of us, our first contact with wild flowers was as toddlers making daisy chains, blowing a dandelion seed 'clock' or seeing if we like butter by placing a golden yellow buttercup under our chins. And this very intimate connection can be the first spark of a life-long love of wild flowers.

We know people just want to do the right thing which is why we've published this list to help build confidence. Because the real threat to our wild flora is if we scold a child, "Do *not* pick the flowers!" they step away from them, they don't reach out their hands to touch them, and they don't form any sort of relationship with them. As a result, **wild flowers have become out of bounds and out of our lives.**

Research by Plantlife has shown that less than half of 16-24 year olds are able to correctly name bluebell (the UK's favourite wild flower) and only 4% could recognise red clover, one of our commonest wild flowers. Even more worryingly, words including buttercup, dandelion, violet and primrose have been removed from the Oxford Junior Dictionary because they're just not used by children anymore. **And if they don't know them, it's unlikely they'll ever love or cherish them.**

But despite this, there is a real desire to learn about our wild flowers; over half of 16-24 year olds in our poll agreed they would like to be able to identify more. This is why we launched the [Great British Wildflower Hunt](#) to encourage children and families to get out into local parks, woods and the countryside and find 70 different wildflowers. We want people to learn about the history, culture and folklore of these flowers and this sometimes includes a long tradition of picking.

So to help break down the boundaries and establish closer connections with wildflowers, we've carefully selected a **dozen very common and abundant wild flowers for which it's OK to pick a small handful.**

We want children to feel that it's OK to reach out and gather a few blooms to bring into the home, give to their granny, put into a flower press or just enjoy close-up. It might just be the start of relationship that lasts forever.

2. Surely children can enjoy and learn about wildflowers without picking them? People have all sorts of places they can learn about nature. You don't have to take a penguin home from the zoo to learn more about it so why do you need to take wild flowers home?

Well, you don't need to... but you can if you want! Yes, there are lots of ways we can all learn about wildlife and wild flowers these days and new technology like apps really help.

But common wild flowers really give us a unique opportunity to get up close and personal with wildlife. Unlike animals you can reach out and actually touch them, you can feel them, rub them between your fingers and smell the aromas in their leaves. There's the scent of their flowers and of course some are delicious to eat. You can't do any of these things with a penguin.

It's all about building an intimate relationship with the common wild flowers around you. **For all the television, books and apps we can consume, nothing beats that tactile, tangible, sensory relationship you can have with plants.** Gathering a few wildflowers to bring home is a very rewarding and even guttural act, rather like bringing back the bounty of a hunter-gatherer, but prettier and with much less blood. And with really small children it's self-evident - nature is in their nature. A toddler and a stick are a match made in heaven.

3. Can't you just look at wildflowers where they are and leave them for others to enjoy?

We suggest only gathering a small handful where you find these flowers growing in abundance, leaving plenty for others to enjoy.

It's absolutely fine to pick half a dozen stems or so of cow parsley from miles and miles of wayside verge thickly garlanded with them in May (and whose fate is very likely to be mown by the council anyway!), and a large un-mown park might have a million daisies in flower in spring. We've only listed plants that usually flower in large quantities. [Our Code of Conduct sets out some guidance on when and how much to pick.](#)

4. But surely it's illegal to pick any wild flowers? They're not your property to pick and you can't just trespass onto anyone's land to pick flowers.

Well, you can't just trespass onto anyone's land, full stop. Contrary to widespread belief, it is not illegal to pick most wild flowers for personal, non-commercial use. The only stipulations are that you must not pick on protected land like a nature reserve and there are a number of very rare species that are specifically protected against picking by law.

Picking is covered in some detail in the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order (1985) and the Theft Act (1968) in England and Wales, and [we have outlined the legislation here](#).

5. Picking has caused the extinction of some plants and 1-in-5 flowers are under threat of extinction yet you're now encouraging people to go out and pick them. Surely that completely contradicts what you are trying to do as a conservation charity?

It's true that 20% of our flowers are under threat, but thankfully over 1300 species are not at risk and many of our wild flowers remain widespread and common in the countryside. Out of all these, we've listed 12 that are known to occur in 90% or more of UK 10-km squares and which are not only frequent but also abundant. Nine of them are in the top-20 flowers found by participants of the [Great British Wildflower Hunt](#) last summer. Some of them, such as primrose, cow parsley and dandelion are actually increasing.

The decline of wild flowers and loss of colour from our countryside has been well documented (see Plantlife's [Our Vanishing Flora](#) report). As a conservation charity, we would dearly love to live in a world where wild flowers are so breathtakingly common and abundant we can pick many without concern. We're a long way from that yet, so this list of 12 is a small step on the way.

6. I love seeing wild flowers like primroses pop up in my area and I would be upset and even angry if I saw people picking them. You could almost say it was selfish or vandalism?

We ask people to behave responsibly, with due care and consideration for others and for the flowers. Our *Code of Conduct* [\[LINK\]](#) sets out some guidance on when and how much to pick.

The key thing to remember is: *don't pick flowers if you will visibly diminish the display*. For example, if there are just a few primroses on a roadside bank, leave them alone to flourish, but in a large woodland with thousands of flowers, it's OK to pick half a dozen to enjoy at home.

Gathering wild flowers has comparisons with foraging, which has recently surged in popularity and is widely accepted; Amazon lists nearly 20 books on foraging and even the Field Studies Council has published a [list of 25 plants to forage](#). And who didn't relish an afternoon blackberrying as a child? Many people pick small quantities of wild leaves, fruit, roots and flowers to eat, leaving behind enough for the plant to continue growing and for others to enjoy. Gathering small quantities of flowers for a posy or vase is the same - a feast for the eyes if not the stomach.

7. Shouldn't we leave wildflowers to set seed? Surely picking them will lead to fewer wildflowers in the future?

There are three main reasons why picking a small numbers of flowers of abundant plants won't lead to fewer plants:

1. **Most plants produce vast quantities of seed.** A single plant of oxeye daisy will produce 30-40 flowers and over 4000 seeds, while dandelions in one square metre of lawn can produce over 5000 seeds.
2. If a flower is removed from a plant, hormones are produced to **stimulate the growth of more flowers.** This is a natural response that has evolved to overcome the removal of flowers grazing by animals. Conversely, once seed is produced hormones tend to prevent the growth of flowers - all the energy goes into development of the seeds.
3. Unlike animals, most plants don't depend entirely on sexual reproduction to survive. **Many rely much more heavily on vegetative reproduction than we realise.** The spread of cow parsley on road verges is largely through buds produced in its basal leaves that grow into new plants, while the spreading stems of greater stitchwort detach themselves and form new plants.

During the 1970s, a small commercial enterprise in Devon was collecting 1.3 million primrose blooms from a wood each year; these were tied in small posies with a strand of wool and posted all over the country. A team of ecologists were brought in to assess the effects on the primrose population. Noting that only a few flowers were ever collected from any one plant, they found that the level of picking was not a threat to the survival of primroses, especially given that individual plants had a lifespan of 15-25 years.

8. Shouldn't we leave wildflowers for pollinating bees, butterflies and other pollinating insects? Surely picking them will impact on their survival?

Just as plants produce large quantities of flowers and seeds, they also produce large quantities of nectar and pollen. The average sized British lawn with eight dandelion flowers per square metre produces sufficient nectar to support over 15,000 bee visits per day.

Many of the flowers on our list produce lots of nectar and pollen and taking into account the abundance with which they bloom means that gathering a small handful will have no impact on pollinating bees, butterflies or other insects.

9. You run a road verge campaign asking councils not to cut down flowers too early in the year but wait until they set seed, but here you are telling people to pick flowers in spring

Mowing of verges can start as early as March and often continues regularly throughout the spring and summer. Huge damage is caused by flail mowers cutting *all* the vegetation on a verge down to the ground, often just as it's coming into prime flowering. Early and

