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# Low-Cost Housing is Possible Only if we Prioritise Value for Money

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**JANE POWERS**  
GARDENS


If you can overcome an ingrained dislike of dandelions, a wildflower meadow is a thing of beauty

I am getting ahead of myself here and thinking of summer, and specifically of summer meadows. I was rushed headlong into these thoughts by the simultaneous arrival of warmer weather and a new edition of Christopher Lloyd's 2004 classic book on meadows. Lloyd, who died in 2006, was a giant among gardeners. He was known for his opinionated writings: 25 books and much journalism, including a 42-year span of weekly gardening columns for *Country Life* (his final offering appeared just three months before his death at 84).

His six-acre garden at Great Dixter, in East Sussex, is celebrated — receiving more than 50,000 visitors a year — and is now run by a charitable trust, with Lloyd's head gardener, Fergus Garrett, in charge.

There are meadows in plenty at Dixter, made on all kinds of terrain: on dry, damp and poor soil and in sun and shade. Lloyd was a continual experimenter, using both native and introduced species, and his expertise was considerable.

Garrett has provided a new 40-page introduction to the book, bringing the reader up to date with recent developments at Dixter and with the practice of meadow-making in general. New photographs by Carol Casselden augment Jonathan Buckley's original pictures.

Lawn fiends will have fits when they see the clouds of dandelion clocks floating among the grasses and wildflowers in the Topiary Lawn. This is not an image you would have seen in a gardening book 20 years ago, but it is strangely attractive — if you can avoid worry about all the infant dandelions springing up in the paving cracks.

Meadows: at Great Dixter and Beyond (£30/€37.75) comes from Pimpernel Press, a brave new publisher whose catalogue includes a series of reissues of garden classics, as well as new works. I recommend this book for anyone interested in meadows, either because they want to make their own or just because they love the romance of the flowery mead.

It is possible to grow a meadow in a tiny area, but you must not walk or loll about on it when its plants are taller: it has to be a space purely to admire. The smaller the meadow, the more definition it needs to announce that it is intentional and not just a weedy bit of grass.

So, make sure that the edges are delineated in some way, by a mown strip or hard landscaping. If it is large enough, mow a path to direct people safely through it, and to contrast with the free-spirited character of the long grass and flowers.

A mown path also allows you to lie down for a spot of what I call "meadowtating", where you become one with the miniature celebration of life a few inches from ground level.

A healthy meadow has dozens of grass and flower species, and armies of insects and other invertebrates that feed upon their pollen and nectar, and on each other. There is much to muse upon in this little



# Go wild on your lawn



Cammasias on the lawn at Great Dixter, left; above, a border in the formal gardens; below, eyebright, poppies and LLOYD with fellow gardener Beth Chatto



universe of intermingled grasses and flowering plants. It is a way to connect immersively with the sights, sounds and smells of nature, even if your garden is in the middle of a city.

The meadows at Great Dixter were made from existing lawns. Christopher Lloyd even made one on his late father's putting

green — an act that seemed to please him greatly.

His recipe for converting lawn to meadow is to stop using fertilisers and weedkillers, which lets the existing broad-leaved plants (non-grass species) recover and reproduce. The meadow flowers — which may be native or non-native species

— are then introduced as bulbs, plugs or seed. Seeds can have a difficult time germinating in thicker grass, so the lawn should be mown very short (scalped almost) and the surface scratched before sowing.

You can also sow an entire meadow from seed after removing the existing sod and weeds. Sowing can be done between now

and June, or between late-August and October — although the latter period is not for clay soils. If the soil is very rich you can scrape off the top layer to reduce its fertility. Roll and rake the surface, and sow a meadow mixture that is suited to your conditions.

Expect a newly made meadow to change

its profile of species over the years as slower and stronger plants take over from the bright ephemerals, such as cornflowers and red poppies. Where grass growth is strong and is crowding out the less robust plants, add hemiparasitic species such as yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), red bartisia (*Odontites vernus*) and eyebright (*Euphrasia sp.*). These feed partially on the roots of neighbouring plants, stealing some of their vigour.

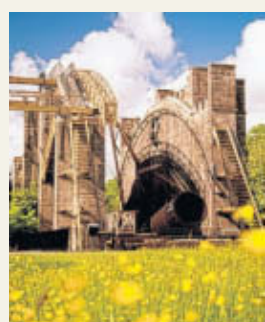
Meadows need mowing or grazing at the correct time — the Old English root of the word is "maed", which means mow. If it is not managed properly, a flowery mead will become overrun with tough plants, and will try its hardest to turn into scrubby woodland. The time to cut is usually late summer — when bulb foliage has faded and the most important plants have dropped their seed.

Most invertebrates have completed their life cycle now as well, so you won't be disturbing the caterpillars or pupae of moths and butterflies. Remove the clippings a day or two after cutting to allow the last of the seeds to drop off. Your meadow will look sad and shorn at first, but new green shoots will spring up in a week or two.

## Grow for it

### Meadow musing

See good meadows at: Birr Castle, pictured, Co Offaly (birrcastle.com); Drishane, west Cork (drishane.com); Killruddery, Co Wicklow (killruddery.com); National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh, Co Wicklow (botanicgardens.ie); Salthill Gardens, Co Donegal (donegalgardens.com).



### A date with Dan

Fancy an evening with British gardener, landscape architect and writer Dan Pearson? The maker of many Chelsea Flower Show creations and garden designer for London's Garden Bridge will speak at Lismore Castle, in Co Waterford, on Saturday. [lismorecastlegardens.com](http://lismorecastlegardens.com)



### Jane digs...

Wildflowers.ie: Sandro Cafolla's Design by Nature website is more than a portal for selling seed for meadows and wildflowers. It's also a heartfelt and zealous manifesto with a mad, quirky tone.

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# Low-cost housing is possible only if we prioritise value for money

Costs are spiralling at the Ballymun project in Dublin, while Wexford's passive houses set a good example

Assessing value for money is now standard practice for government departments and agencies. These bodies, including the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor-General, evaluate the economy and efficiency with which state bodies acquire, use and dispose of resources. This is a positive step in a state system that isn't very keen on post-hoc evaluation.

Since 2009, the Department of the Taoiseach has insisted that all legislation be subject to a regulatory impact assessment — to identify likely positive and negative outcomes of projects. To date, very little legislation has been subject to such an assessment. Evidence is still a dirty word in Ireland.

It will therefore be interesting to see if a value-for-money evaluation will be carried out on the modular/rapid build housing provided at Poppintree in

Ballymun, Dublin. Initially proposed as true modular housing (produced in factories and assembled on site) last October, they have since morphed into "rapid build" housing, which turned out to be fairly standard timber-frame housing.

The cost of these units also morphed from under €100,000 per modular house to a final total of €243,000 per rapid build house. The actual cost of each house is about €220,000, but Dublin city council requested and received an allowance of €500,000 to manage the 28-day project of 22 houses, thus adding €23,000 to the cost of each house.

The houses have not been completed as I write, so perhaps when they are finished the true costs may be less. Or more.

Interestingly, the houses are 92 sq m in size, which meets the Department of Environment's

minimum size requirements for a three-bedroom terraced house — but not Dublin council's, despite the fact that the council's rule is supposed to take precedence. The tender called for proposals to meet the local authority's minimum size requirements of 100 sq m.

The pre-qualifying threshold for tendering specified an average annual turnover of €10m, thus excluding nearly every modular housing supplier or builder in Ireland.

The contract went to a Northern Ireland company that hadn't advertised its products at a test site on East Wall Road behind North Strand fire station last year (as other potential tenderers had). The company is currently selling 205 sq m luxury houses in Dungannon for less than the cost of its 92 sq m houses in Poppintree.

A bit of a mess, I think. Meanwhile, in Wexford, the builder Michael Bennett is selling 102 sq m passive houses in Enniscorthy for €190,000 each. The fact that they are passive means they have minimal running costs.

Now that is value for money. It also casts doubts on other industry construction cost quotes, even if the builder got the site for free (and



Tackling the housing crisis will be more expensive if the government persists in paying builders over the odds

we don't know if he did or not). It appears the government is paying way over the odds for the properties in Ballymun.

The government also recently announced a €300m plan to build 1,500 social houses in various tranches using public-private partnership (PPP). Using PPPs is like building on a credit card, but the true cost depends on how the scheme is set up. My understanding is that the plan is to use a "design, build, finance and operate" PPP.

Not only will the winning bidder design and build these social houses (this is a fairly standard PPP), they will also provide the finance (which will not be cheap), and maintain (or "operate") the

houses for about 30 years.

The headline figures would suggest that the 1,500 houses will cost €200,000 each, but even at very generous state-backed, low cost finance, each house will end up costing a multiple of this over the lifetime of the PPP, and that's before any operating cost.

For example, the UK currently has more than £222bn (€282bn) worth of PPP debt for assets worth less than £57bn. It doesn't really make sense to go down this route to solve the housing crisis when the state can build decent permanent houses itself for less than €200,000 each.

Maintenance is where many of these PPP companies make their

real profits as they tie in high costs of doing basic jobs such as landscaping to huge — and ever-inflatable — costs over which the state loses control. There is a famous case of one British PPP hospital being charged £300 to change a light bulb and another where a school was charged the same price to install a single plug socket.

Value-for-money exercises will help tell us the right thing to do, but having the value system to do the right thing is the real issue.

We seem determined to do the most expensive thing possible at every turn which means we're either not thinking properly about this, or we've money to burn. I suspect it's not the latter.

## LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT

