



**VERDANT MEADOW:** Sandro has planted many varieties of wildflower, including corn poppies

# From boom to bloom

Ireland's wildflowers wilted in the Celtic Tiger years – but one gardener is fighting back



**EUGENE HIGGINS**  
In the Garden

In the opening scenes of the movie *Gladiator*, the Roman general Maximus – played by Russell Crowe – strides imperiously through his fields, his hands caressing the ears of wheat. As I stand with Sandro Caffola in a meadow of waist-high wildflowers in Co. Wicklow, I am reminded of Maximus – and his stirring words to his troops: 'What you do in life, echoes in eternity.'

In his own way, Sandro is an equally heroic warrior, battling to save Ireland's wildflowers from what he sees as the detrimental effects of our economic boom.

During the Celtic Tiger years, the growth in property development, forestry and farming destroyed the natural diversity of thousands of greenfield sites. Modern gardening practices and the way we use hedges, ponds and woodland is also wiping out our natural flora, he says.

With his Co. Carlow-based company Design By Nature, Sandro has been working for more than two decades to restore wildflowers to the verges, fields, parks and gardens of Ireland.

You may not have realised it, but you can see his work everywhere, from the The Old Head in Kinsale to the pretty verges of Ireland's motorways and bypasses.

I met him recently in Kilmeade Wildflower Park near Athy, Co. Kildare, where he has been working to restore the local wildflowers. His Italian blood may have something to do with it, but Sandro is passionate about restoring our meadows.



**PRIDE AND JOY:** Sandro, left, hopes his meadows in Kilmeade Flower Park will inspire more people to plant the likes of marjoram, below, and mullein, above

'My whole landscape is Ireland,' he explains, showing me a meadow he planted with 30 different varieties of wildflower.

'A meadow is not a fixed collection of plants – it's a succession of species, so the look changes each year.'

'That's why people who plant meadows can think they have failed, as in years three and four, the grasses come in and try to smother the flowers. At the end of the season, in year four, therefore, one needs to cut down the growth and rake to bare soil. Once you get that part right, then it is established.'

Over the years, Sandro has seen up close the effect that the boom has had on the countryside.

'We had so much wild nature we took it all for granted, but the Celtic Tiger wiped out much of the best non-protected meadows in Ireland as they were developed for forestry, farming or property.'

It's not just in this country either. The book, *Where Have All The Wild-*

*flowers Gone?* is an excellent study into how scarce meadows have become in Britain, but it also offers tips on how to grow wildflowers in smaller spaces.

It inspired me to leave my front lawn in the Dublin suburbs and let it express itself. Initially, it raised eyebrows but in time, a few flowers popped out of the overgrown grass, and even a thistle or two.

This can be very rewarding. 'Our aim is to get people to sow and grow wildflower meadows in whatever situation,' says Sandro. 'I want to

inspire the public to grow meadows everywhere and put Ireland's flora where it should be, at the very forefront of all planting.'

'Wildflowers protect nature, improve the tourist experience, inspire children and artists, heal us, feed us and now shelter us. Even nettles can be made into building materials.'

Wildflower meadows are excellent at absorbing carbon from the atmosphere. Canadian researchers have found that fields of wildflowers are more efficient at absorbing carbon than an equivalent patch of rainforest.



So how does one go about bringing wildflowers to your garden? Wildflower seeds, added this autumn, could create a small city meadow by next year.

Late August and September are the best times to sow meadows in most areas so now's the time to get cracking. From sowing in the first year you will get beautiful annuals like poppies, cornflower and marigold.

A gram-and-a-half of seed is enough to sow one metre of meadow and a pack is not expensive. Most of the seeds will germinate in the first year, and keep germinating until the third year. After that, your meadow will start to become grassy, even if you sowed it without grass, as the grass seeds in your soil will germinate.

Each year after cutting, rake the dead grass away and rake the surface of the meadow to remove dead grass or thatch. This will allow the sunlight to germinate more seedlings.

Sandro has established roadside esker meadows for Offaly Co. Council and recently repaired sites of scientific interest.

He is even planning to use abandoned quarries to grow wildflowers. 'Lots have been closed down in the past and are an excellent site for converting to wildflower,' he said.

'Our hope is to work with quarry owners to show them how to abandon quarries back to nature and, at the same time, make them safe, as many contain deep excavations.'

And so the battle continues for Sandro. I would like to think that we can all help him in his crusade.

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## Drinking deep on summer to every last drop

The sun seems to spend most of its time behind the clouds these days but we still need ways of keeping cool in the overcast, muggy heat.

And what better to refresh you than cool water. Jugs of it in the fridge can take up a lot of valuable space, but with a Powerpoint water cooler, pictured left, you'll have a handy supply.

This nifty gadget sells at around €49.99 in Powercity, DID and other

By **Muriel Bolger**

stores nationwide. Or how about making your own ice cream and sorbets with an M&S Ice-Cream Maker for €135. If that's not to your liking, you can whip up fresh fruit juices, or smoothies on a Dualit Blender for €135.



Of course, even the humblest drink of water tastes better from a stylish glass and Debenhams has a new range designed by Betty Jackson in a black smoked swirl pattern, pictured. These will add class to any table in or out of doors. Goblets and hi-balls €9.50, and tumblers €7.75 each.

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