



## AGRII WILDLIFE INFORMATION SHEET No.1

# A cheap and easy early pollinator lifeline

Wildlife delivery need not be expensive, complicated or take land out of production.

## Sounds too good to be true...

### We can help

Autumn is the time for planting new crops, and that includes the wildlife ones as well. This leaflet describes a simple, cheap and effective way of boosting the vital early spring pollinator food supplied by planting Goat and Grey willows. It is essential for female bees coming out of hibernation in March to get adequate supplies of pollen (protein) which is used to build them up and increase egg fertility.



### How many

Today's countryside is short of early pollen but farmers can help rectify this by evenly spacing at least one willow per 25 hectares in hedge gaps and field corners.

### Background

Anybody following environmental news can't have failed to notice the Government's recent commitment to pollinators so this is now topical stuff.

For years we have taken pollinators pretty much for granted and the job they do in securing many crop yields, but recent issues have raised pollinators to the top of many agendas.

Many say that pollinators are in trouble, with numbers dropping, and intensive agriculture is partly to blame. Well that's as maybe, but what can be done that is cheap, easy and really makes a difference? Simple... 'Sow flowers, get insects'. Sowing wild flowers fits many schemes, and much has been written on the subject. But there is an idea that is even simpler and cheaper: 'sow willows get insects!'

### Details

Some male willow trees produce characteristic large yellow catkins in early spring, the colour being produced by the pollen-covered anthers. Willows are dioecious which means that male and female flowers occur on separate trees.

It is the Goat and Grey willows which bear the big male catkins in March and April. These two common trees can hybridise, and unlike some other willows, they don't need to have their toes in water. There are other useful native flowering shrubs but only one other that flowers in March: Blackthorn. Slightly later-flowering species include Hawthorn, Crab apple, Wild Cherry and Maples.

March is the time many pollinators emerge and begin their new lives. It's also a time of year when flowers are in short supply, the so-called 'hungry gap', so plants which flower in early spring (March-April) are very welcome.





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### So what can I do now?

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#### OPTION ONE.

Go to a good garden centre and in February-March buy bare root cuttings so the work has been done for you (but where's the fun and ownership in that!).

There is one very big downside to this method, and that is you can't select the stock, and there's no guarantee you will get a male tree.

#### OPTION TWO.

Almost guaranteed success comes from the following method:

1. October to February is the best time to take cuttings as the sap is down and the plant is dormant. Select stems that have a thickness somewhere between a pencil and a thumb. These are then cut into 30 centimetre lengths with the basal cut just below a bud.

Some cuttings can have the top cut off which will produce a more bushy plant. Larger cuttings may be taken - this speeds up the time till flowering, but failure of cuttings increases.

2. Fill a few big flower pots with potting compost mixed with a bit of sharp sand to help drainage, and push several cuttings into each flower pot so half of the cutting is buried.

3. Keep these well watered and after one year they can be planted out. Losses are reduced if at the end of the first year the cuttings are potted on for one more year, and then planted out.

4. Planting out is best done in March as soon as the soil begins to warm up but before the cuttings are in leaf. It will take a couple of years for these cuttings to produce the flowers you need.

5. The best place to plant is in a sheltered, sunny site either in a hedge gap or at the end of a hedge. Field corners are also good, where you can plant a group on the south side of an existing hedge.

6. Tree guards are essential. The plastic netting tubes are better than the solid plastic tubes, which tend to force rapid, misshapen growth from the tree. Keep the young trees weed-free to about a metre radius for the first three years.

#### OPTION THREE.

There is of course an easier way, but success is much reduced. That is to take much bigger cuttings and plant them straight into their final place, put a tube round them and keep them weed free.

Marek Nowakowski. September 2014.