

Managing your Community Meadow



Wildflower meadows thrive on soil that is **not very fertile**, so it is important that your site does not become enriched through the application of fertilisers or the build-up of dead plant material - therefore some kind of **management of your meadow will be necessary**. You will need to cut the plant material and **remove it from the site**.

Every year your site will need to be cut after the flowers have finished seeding, usually by late September. Once cut, the grass cuttings must be removed from the meadow. How you will undertake the long term management of your meadow should be planned before you start your project.

Local farmers or contractors may be prepared to cut the meadow and remove the cuttings, but there may be a cost. If your site has been grass for some time, an early spring cut may be advantageous to help the wildflowers become established. This will help to weaken more competitive species such as grasses, docks and thistles.

TOP TIP

Meadow management can be a great way of involving the community - you could organise volunteers to help rake up the cuttings and make hay!



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Some more detail on cutting

For the first few years of its life your newly sown meadow will need some careful management to allow the wildflowers to grow, flower and set seed. Every meadow is different and management should be adjusted accordingly, however here are some general recommendations, particularly relevant in the early years of the meadow establishing:

- **Control weeds:** You may need to cut/top tall weeds such as docks and thistles in the early years to prevent them dominating the meadow.
- **The first year's growth:** In the first year you will need to prevent seedlings from getting smothered by vigorous grass growth. This can be achieved by mowing to a height of about 5 cm, or the mower's highest setting and remove the grass cuttings. This may need doing several times over the year.
- **The next few years:** You should be aiming to allow the sward to 'fill-out', i.e. create a good coverage of wildflowers and grasses. The meadow should be cut once a year after it has flowered and the seed has dropped (late September).

Everything needs somewhere to live

Providing a source of nectar and pollen via wildflowers is only part of the picture, the animals that will move into your meadow also need somewhere to shelter, hunt, feed and breed. Many invertebrates require long grass for egg laying and over wintering as eggs, pupae or larvae in order to complete their life cycles. Grass is the larval food for many species of butterfly and moth, such as the Meadow brown butterfly (*Maniola jurtina*) and the Large yellow underwing moth (*Noctua pronuba*), which lay their eggs in long grass.

Leaving an area of uncut rough grassland can provide nesting areas for bumblebees – undisturbed areas may attract voles whose nests bumblebees often use, these areas can also provide ideal conditions for surface-nesting species such as the Common carder bee (*Bombus pascuorum*).

Leaving a patch of grass to grow long and remain uncut over the winter is the best way to achieve this. Cut these areas every 2-3 years and try to leave a patch of at least 2x5m. The edges of the site are the best places for longer grass patches, connected to a hedgerow. This improves foraging for birds such as song thrushes. House sparrows will use thick bushes as shelter and from there, come to forage in the grass for invertebrates and seeds.



Ringlet
Aphantopus hyperantus
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Common carder bee
Bombus pascuorum
©Stephen Falk

