

Managing recently created grasslands

Many wild flowers and grasses take up to three years to flower. Correct management of the developing grassland is essential in these early years – the site must be regularly checked and action taken to manage any weed problems. Cutting and grazing must also be carefully managed to enable the developing sward to become properly established. Slippage in weed control is not uncommon, especially on farms managed under contract where labour and machinery are not always close to hand. **Management must be flexible, and responsive to the individual site.**

Managing weeds

The vegetation may need to be topped in the first spring and summer several times, or only over parts of the field where there are tall annuals, perennial or biennial weeds. Any cutting in spring should be above the height of Yellow Rattle plants and should avoid disturbing any ground-nesting birds.

- Especially on ex-arable sites, there will be a strong growth of **annual weeds** in the first year, and possibly in the second year; low-growing annuals provide cover for germinating wild flower seedlings and are beneficial to the developing grassland; they do not need to be removed
- **Biennial & perennial weeds** (Creeping Thistle, Clustered/Broadleaved Dock, Spear Thistle) must be cut in late spring and summer (especially mid-late June) to prevent them flowering: there can be high infestations of Spear Thistle in the early years on arable reversion sites but this species is easily controlled by cutting. These species can also be spot-sprayed, using a knapsack sprayer, or weed-wiped; weed-wiping gloves can be used for small patches; alternatively perennial weeds can be cut to prevent flowering, or individual plants removed using a lazy dog tool. Ragwort must be pulled or spot-sprayed.



Annual weeds and Yellow Rattle in May (after autumn sowing) on an arable reversion site. Photo: Sue Everett

Grazing and mowing for floristic diversity

On ex-arable sites there will be a strong growth of annual weeds and Yellow Rattle in the first spring and summer. The site can be lightly grazed, or mown in Year 1 from early July (southern England). At the end of the first growing season the vegetation should be grazed or mown as tightly as possible. If the quantity of mown vegetation is substantial, and smothers the ground, it should be removed. In subsequent years, the site should ideally remain ungrazed between mid-February and late July (mid-August in northern or upland Britain) while the sward is becoming established (between years 2 and 5), and then cut for hay or topped prior to grazing in late summer/autumn. This will allow sown flowers and grasses to set seed. Some light cattle-grazing from late June may be beneficial and practical if the created site is very large. Sheep will eat the flowers first!

In the early years, outcomes (to achieve maximum floral diversity) can be specified as:

- Sward height by the beginning of growing season not to exceed 5 cm (2cm or less is preferable)
- A high proportion of sown grasses and wildflowers allowed to flower and set seed before mowing or grazing in mid-summer
- Scarcity of Creeping Thistle, Welled Thistle, Spear Thistle, Clustered and Broad-leaved Dock.

Once the sward has become established, the grazing and mowing regimes will need to be reviewed to take into account the characteristics of the site and how it has responded, as well as farming practicalities. Aftermath or late summer/autumn grazing will be essential for hay meadows and most other sites.

Some spring or early summer-grazing may be useful, e.g. if undersirable grazing-intolerant species (such as False Oat-grass) become abundant.

Low intensity spring and summer grazing is often beneficial to wild flowers of native grasslands, as it helps to prevent incursion by scrub and coarse grasses and may favour the later-flowering species. Spring grazing will be needed prior to weed-wiping creeping thistle but will eradicate Yellow Rattle (an annual, with short-lived seeds).

This note was compiled by Sue Everett, with contributions from Emorsgate Seeds and Charles Flower. Produced as a contribution to the *Flora locale* Local Seeds for Local Needs Initiative and the Thames Valley Meadows Action Plan Project. October 2004.



Yellow Rattle and Groundsel, arable reversion site in May after autumn sowing. Photo: Sue Everett