

WILDFLOWER AFTERCARE

Perennials

Managing an area of wildflowers is essential to retain species diversity and to keep weeds and unwanted species at bay. Traditionally, a meadow would have been maintained by taking a summer hay cut and aftermath grazing by livestock in the early autumn. It is this action of cutting and clearing that needs to be replicated to successfully maintain wildflowers.



First Year

Most perennial species will take a year to fully establish. If sown into a bare soil, the aim of the first year maintenance is to control any annual weeds that may emerge. Seeds from weed species such as Mayweed, Thistles and

Nettles may well be present within the soil and will readily germinate once the soil is disturbed. These can be controlled by mowing in the spring of the first year to eliminate these faster establishing weed species and prevent them from producing more seed. If levels of grass growth in a meadow mixture are vigorous, it may be necessary to continue mowing throughout the first year. Whenever mowing it is important that any cuttings are removed, this will prevent nutrients being returned to the soil.



Spring Maintenance

In the spring it may be necessary to mow down to 75mm to remove the first flush of grass.

This is particularly important on areas of fertile ground, or during the first few years of a newly sown area when the grasses may have more

vigour. On well established sites or unfertile soils this may not be necessary. A spring cut should be taken no later than the end of April.



Late Summer/Autumn Maintenance

The autumn maintenance essentially consists of taking a 'hay cut', leaving the cut debris to dry and clearing the debris from the site.



Timing

The hay cut can be made any time from July to September. On more fertile sites it is advisable to take the hay cut in July, as this will remove the maximum amount of nutrients from the site.

A later hay cut in September is fine, but if done regularly this can narrow down the range of species, encouraging more dominant species to proliferate. It is therefore advisable to alter the timing of the hay cut on an annual basis or to cut different areas on the same site at different times.



Equipment

The area will require cutting down to a height of around 40-75mm, using either of the following implements of machines; depending on the size of the area;

- Strimmer
- Rotary lawn mower (heavy duty petrol)
- Tractor mounted rotary or flail mower

Once the area is cut down, the debris should be allowed to dry out before being collected up and removed from the site. Smaller areas can be cut and raked off and larger areas can be cut and bailed if possible. By allowing the cut debris to dry out before it is collected, it will give opportunity for more of the seeds to be dispersed back into the sward.



Secondary Cut or Grazing

After the hay cut and up until October the area can be mown with the cuttings removed, this will help to keep the grasses under control and sward open to allow more flower species to thrive. Where possible the area can be used for aftermath grazing by animals. The action of the animal hooves will help to open up the sward, creating caps for new plants to establish.



Harrowing

Harrowing will help to remove thatch accumulations at the base of the sward. Late autumn is the best time to harrow as it creates gaps which remain open to flower seed germination from autumn through to spring. There is an opportunity to add seeds to grassland at this time. Meadows were traditionally harrowed in spring to level mole hills and make mowing easier in summer.