

Managing Churchyards Grassland for Wildlife

Background

Changes in the way we manage our countryside during the last century has led to a dramatic reduction in opportunities for wildlife, with agricultural intensification the main cause. Since the 1930s, 97% of England's wildflower-rich grasslands have disappeared, which has led to similar reductions in the animals that rely on this habitat such as insects, bats and birds. The use of pesticides in agriculture and in gardens is adding to this pressure, with growing evidence that widely used chemicals like glyphosate and neonicotinoids persist in the environment and spread into watercourses, killing plants and animals far from the intended target.

Amenity grasslands, such as parks, verges, village greens and churchyards, are usually cut very short to enable recreation and to create a 'neat' appearance. While grasses can survive this management as they have growth points at the top of their roots, wildflowers grow from points higher up their stems, and so are killed.

Add to this that amenity grasslands are cut regularly throughout the year, there is little opportunity for surviving wildflowers to flower, let alone set seed. Seed mixes used to re-sow amenity grasslands usually contain no wildflowers and often are reliant on watering, fertilisers and pesticides to control 'weeds'.

Drought and hot weather show up another problem with this management. The size of a plant above ground is approximately mirrored by the size of its roots underground. So tightly cut grass generally has very shallow roots, making it vulnerable to a lack of water, when it browns-off and dies. It is equally delicate in wet weather when even light pressure from people walking on it can turn a grassland into mud.

Most of the way we manage our churchyards comes from a perception that a single colour of vibrant green with no interruptions and cut tight to the floor is the most attractive finish and what people want. However, there is increasing evidence that, *while all green spaces are beneficial for our health, wildlife-rich high-quality green spaces are considerably better for us and give us more enjoyment.*

Maintaining tightly cut grass through cutting, fertilising and removing weeds (manually or with chemicals) is costly. Add to this repair costs when drought and wet weather lead to damage, and the cost in time and money can be considerable.

Changing attitudes

If we are to reverse the declines in our wildlife, we need to change our approach to managing our churchyard grasslands. Every grassland is a potential nature reserve that can be a home to plants and animals that are struggling in our countryside. We can still keep paths cut short and maintain grassland around graves which are regularly visited but we should be letting everything else grow.

Here are some tips for managing amenity grasslands for nature:

- Choose areas that will be kept short (e.g. paths, areas around graves that are regularly visited) and cut these as normal but on a slightly higher setting – above 40mm will enable some wildflowers to survive and the higher you can cut, the more survive.

These cut areas will ensure your site looks managed and will ‘frame’ your wildflower grasslands. It is worth cutting the edges of paths and smaller areas on an angle (see image below), using a strimmer, to prevent tall grasses and wildflowers falling across the path.



- Choose the areas you would like as wildflower grasslands - these should be areas that aren't regularly used by people. Allow them to grow from April through to at least mid-July but preferably later. This may alter each year depending on the weather and site requirements. Historically, hay meadows were rotated with pastures and so many of our native plants have adapted well to a rotational management.
- Once these areas have flowered, cut them using a strimmer, a scythe, or an Allen scythe type mower which doesn't smash up the cut grass. Cut no lower than 50mm (2 inches) but preferably higher than this to ensure wildflowers can survive. Leave the cut grass (or hay) for a few days to dry and drop its seed – this will save you re-seeding, make the hay lighter to move and ensure all the wildflowers can set seed. Then rake off the hay and remove – this makes an excellent community or volunteer day. This can be stacked in a corner to create a wildlife habitat or given away or sold as hay.
- If grass growth is vigorous in September, consider mowing once lightly to control. This mimics 'aftermath' grazing that has been practiced by farmers for centuries.
- When sowing new grassland areas, use a wildflower-rich mix with native grasses and flowers matched to the soil in your area. Try 'over-sowing' – adding some wildflower seed to existing grassland. Molehills and bare patches are ideal places to add seed. If you want to over-sow a larger area, cut it down tight (and remove cuttings) to expose any bare ground. If there is little bare ground lightly rake through.
- Avoid spraying with pesticides. Injurious weeds like thistles, nettles and docks are a sign of where management isn't quite right yet. Control them by pulling or cutting individually – or just leave them as these are great for insects.

- Tell people what you're doing. Use leaflets, notices and signs (in keeping with the site) to explain the change in management and why. Try to involve local community as much as possible through volunteering to manage and survey the site. Organise walks, talks, and events to engage people in the site.

Finally, consider grazing. Many churchyards, parks and village greens use sheep to keep down the grass, giving grazing to local farmers or smallholders. This would require ensuring a stock-proof area, although temporary fencing could be used for this. Time the grazing to that of a hay cut or slightly later – so mid-July onwards – and ensure the sheep are removed before they can graze the grass too tightly. This requires a good relationship with the grazier and obviously a bit of thought about how the public will react.

Dealing with 'thatch'

Thatch is a loose, organic layer of dead and living shoots, stems, and roots that develops between the zone of green vegetation and the soil surface. It can have either beneficial or detrimental effects on turf depending on the amount present.

If you want to actively over-sow an area with wildflower seed thatch will often prevent a lot of your expensive/hard-won seed from reaching the soil. So you need to expose bare earth in order the seed can make good contact with the soil. Mole hills and bare patches can be an easy way of dealing with this. It is also worth raking (manually scarifying) strips or patches for over-sowing so you retain the thatch habitat across most of the site while opening up some areas for seeding.

A note of caution - the more bare earth you expose the greater the potential for getting injurious weeds spreading. Many of these will only survive while the site is in transition, but lots of people would not want to accidentally provide opportunities for docks and thistles.

It really depends on what you're doing at the time.

Thatch is fantastic for small mammals and therefore the things that feed on them like owls and other birds of prey. It also helps to store carbon as it gradually decomposes into the soil. Together with this it both prevents poaching and erosion by creating a protective raft over the soil and can help natural re-seeding and germination by catching seeds and creating warm niches amongst the thatch (in open areas between the stems).

If a site is reasonably species-rich already, don't worry about scarifying across the whole site but instead just ensure that when the hay is cut, it is left to dry on site for 4 to 7 days so it releases all its seed.

