

## Managing recently created grasslands



*Yellow Rattle and annual weeds in May after a late-autumn sowing with wild-harvested chalk grassland seed*



Photos: Sue Everett

**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.**

Bringing back the meadows



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### Managing weeds

On ex-arable sites, there will be a strong growth of low-growing annual weeds (from the seed bank) and Yellow Rattle (if this was sown) in the first growing season. Other sown plants will germinate in late spring and early summer; seedlings will benefit from the shelter provided by low-growing annual weeds, such as Groundsel and Field Pansy, which do not need to be removed.

The vegetation will need to be topped in the first spring and summer, probably several times, to prevent the growth and flowering of tall weeds including Creeping Thistle, Clustered and Broadleaved Dock, Spear Thistle and Sow-thistle. Topping in mid-late June is especially important to prevent Spear Thistle flowering – this species can be prolific on ex-arable sites during the first few years. As a biennial, it will die out fairly quickly if flowering (and hence seeding) is prevented. Late-summer topping will also be necessary, as thistles will flower again during this time.

To prevent harm to ground-nesting birds and young hares, topping height between April and early July should be no lower than 20cms.

Other Weeds Act plants can be individually removed using a Lazy Dog tool, although this is a labour-intensive exercise. Spot-spraying (using a knapsack) with a suitable herbicide is an alternative option for non-organic holdings. Weed-wiping is advised only if there is a serious perennial weed infestation in subsequent years – the sward must be spring-grazed prior to treatment. Ragwort will need to be pulled or spot-sprayed.

### Grazing and mowing for floristic diversity

**Year 1:** The sward should be lightly grazed or mown, in early July. Large quantities of mown material should be removed – developing seedlings will die if smothered by cuttings.

**Years 2–5:** Ideally, the sward should be left undisturbed between mid-February and late July (mid-August in northern and upland Britain). However, some topping during this time may be required to manage patches of weeds. This approach is best during the early years as it will allow sown plants to flower, set seed and spread. Between late July and mid-August, the sward should be mown for hay, or topped, prior to “aftermath” grazing until the end of the growing season.



*First winter after a late autumn sowing*

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

- ✿ sward height by the beginning of the growing season not to exceed 5cm (2cm or less is preferable);
- ✿ a high proportion of sown grasses and wild flowers allowed to flower and set seed before mowing and grazing in mid-summer; and a
- ✿ scarcity of Creeping Thistle, Waxed Thistle, Spear Thistle, Clustered and Broadleaved Dock by year five.

Once the sward has become established, the grazing and mowing regimes will need to be reviewed, taking into account the site characteristics, condition and growth of the sward and farming practicalities. Aftermath and late-summer grazing will be essential for hay meadows and most other sites.

While spring and summer grazing is not advised for the first ten years, there may be times when grazing can be useful. For instance, spring-grazing will be needed prior to weed-wiping thistle patches, and can help to reduce grazing-intolerant species (such as False Oat-grass) if they become abundant. However, this practice will eradicate Yellow Rattle – an annual, with short-lived seeds. Heavy grazing during this time can also encourage white clover and thistles to flourish, at the expense of other sown herbs.

For long-established herb-rich grasslands, light spring and summer grazing can be beneficial, as it helps to prevent incursion by scrub and coarse grasses, and will encourage low-growing and late-flowering species to flourish.

*For further advisory notes, case studies, guidelines for planting projects in the countryside, training opportunities and suppliers of native flora, go to [www.floralocale.org](http://www.floralocale.org)*



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