

Sowing wild flora seed

Bringing back the meadows



Sowing depth
Seed should be broadcast or drilled on the soil surface.

It should not be buried by slot-seeding because all wild seed requires light to germinate. Burying seed only a few millimetres may significantly reduce the germination rate of seed sown.

When to sow
The ideal time to sow wild flora seed is late summer–early autumn (August–mid

September, but before mid-September in upland areas). Sowings in mid–late July (direct seeding of fresh wild-harvested seed or green hay) can also work well but in dry summers drought conditions can lead to some losses if germination occurs. Plants germinating late in the autumn can be prone to frost damage.

Spring sowing is not recommended except for areas prone to winter flooding or where rain may wash seed away. Spring sowings can also be prone to spring/early summer drought. Some wild flowers such as Yellow Rattle must



Broadcasting fresh brush-harvested seed across an arable reversion site that had been previously sown with a standard “ESA” mix that had only poorly established

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over-winter and will not germinate until the following spring. Yellow Rattle seed should always be sown in the autumn, using seed harvested that year.

Heavy clay soils can be difficult to work when very wet or very dry. Autumn sowings may not be possible if ground preparation is incomplete owing to summer drought. In such cases it can be better to plough the soil in the autumn, allow winter frosts to break up clods and prepare a seedbed in the spring, then spray off or harrow-in germinating weeds prior to sowing in late April.

Sowing is usually done as a one-off operation, but additional hand-sowings can be undertaken in successive years, especially to introduce seed of species that might be unavailable in the first year. If the sward closes up, bare patches may need to be created into which the seed is sown (e.g. by herbicide treatment or discing).

Machinery and equipment for sowing seed

Fresh, unprocessed brush-harvested seed must be broadcast by hand. The seed can be emptied from the collection hopper into bags or into a small trailer. It can be broadcast by one or two people from the back of a pick-up or trailer driven at a slow, safe rate.

Cleaned, wild-harvested seed mixtures are best sown over large areas using a fertiliser spinner. The rate can be calibrated by driving at a known speed, using a measured weight of seed over a known distance and by measuring the breadth of seed distribution from the spinner.

Crop-grown seed can be sown using a gravity drill with the seed metered by rollers. Corn drills with the spouts detached, or a rotary strip seeder can work well. Coulters should be set to allow seed to drop on to the soil surface.

An inert carrier, such as silver sand, can be used to help distribute processed seed evenly (otherwise the variable



Spinning processed brush-harvested seed collected from a native grassland, using a Vicon Variospreeder

seed size can lead to heavy seeds settling). A seed fiddle or seed box, can be used to broadcast seed over areas of one hectare or less, e.g. across weed-killed patches. Adding a carrier will help identify where seed has been sown, but is not essential.

Forage-harvested (chopped) material that contains fresh ripe seed is best spread using a muck spreader with a rear distributor and vertical beaters.

Green hay containing ripe seed is bulky to handle. Bales must be rapidly unrolled not more than an hour after being made, and the hay spread quickly, using a tractor-mounted fork or bucket. Unless very small areas are to be treated, it is easier and more efficient to put the hay through a straw chopper and spread as for forage.

Seed should be rolled after sowing, using a ribbed "crinkle" or "Cambridge" roller. Rolling can be repeated in early spring to help re-consolidate the seedbed, which may have suffered frost-heave over winter. Alternatively, livestock can be put into the field and they will trample the seed into the soil.

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



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