

MANAGING GRASS FOR WILDLIFE

YOU CAN IMPROVE YOUR LAWN by taking a range of measures, some of which are very simple. Maximise the benefits your lawn offers to wildlife by changing how often and to what height you cut your grass.



GRASS OF DIFFERENT HEIGHTS



- ★ Increase the minimum height of your grass to between 3.5 cm and 5 cm (1.5 and 2 inches). Longer grass helps to retain humidity and soil moisture. This will benefit both wildlife and the grass itself.
 - In moist, warm weather you may need to cut the grass every week. In drier weather, cutting every two to three weeks reduces drought stress and keeps the grass green for longer.
- ★ Maximise the value of your lawn by leaving part of it uncut from late May onwards. The exact timing depends on prevailing weather conditions. In dry weather, you can stop cutting earlier in the year. If conditions are wet, you can continue cutting until a little later.
- ★ Retain all, or at least some, long grass throughout the winter months, until the end of March or early April. If you have to cut it, do so in early September, to a minimum height of 45 cm (18 inches).
 - Long grass is best grown against a shrub border. This will help to protect the shrubbery from dry winds and increase humidity beneath it, benefiting wildlife.



Meadow grasshopper

★ denotes priority action

For more ideas please visit:

www.rspb.org.uk/hfw/advice/06

ADDING WILD FLOWERS

★ Meadow flowers improve the attractiveness of areas of long grass. Planting small, pre-grown plugs is the best way to introduce flowers to established lawns.

- Choose plants that are suited to the soil in your garden and occur naturally in your area. Ensure they are of local or UK provenance, and come from a reputable plant supplier.

There are two kinds of flower meadow: spring and summer.

- Spring meadows contain flowers such as cowslips and lady's smock, which bloom between April and May. They may also contain bulbs such as daffodils or fritillaries.
- Spring meadows should not be mown until after the flowers have seeded in June. The grass can then be cut as normal for the rest of the season. However, after the initial cut it is preferable to allow the meadow to grow again. The meadow may need to be topped again in September, to a minimum height of 45 cm (18 inches).
- Summer meadows contain flowers such as knapweeds, cranesbills and oxeye daisies, which bloom between July and August. They should be mown until May and then left until early September, by which time the flowers will have seeded. The area should then be cut to a minimum of 45 cm (18 inches) in height and left again until spring.



RESTORING LAWNS

★ Think carefully before taking any drastic measures to restore what you perceive as 'neglected' lawn. They are often rich in wildlife.

- After a few cuts the grass should start responding. Any scrub that may have developed will soon give up if it is cut back persistently.
- Anthills are an important feature and should be retained. They themselves will also benefit from the restoration, as it will open up the grass around them.

LAWN MAINTENANCE

- Small quantities of short grass cuttings can be left on the lawn. They will help increase the amount of humus in the lawn and will benefit worms and other soil invertebrates.
- Long grass, including that in 'neglected' lawns, will need cutting with a strimmer. The cuttings need raking off and may be composted or spread thinly as a mulch over a shrub bed.
- After the flowers have set seed, meadows should be cut and treated in the same way as long grass.
- Small amounts of leaves will be drawn into the underground tunnels of earthworms, where they will quickly decompose.
- Larger quantities of leaves can be raked off and composted or spread evenly on beds and borders to act as mulch.
- Refrain from watering your lawn. If the grass dries and goes brown, it will soon recover with the next rain. It doesn't make sense to create a wildlife habitat in your garden at the expense of a wetland somewhere else.



TOOLS FOR THE JOB

MOWER

- The size and type of mower you should use depends on the size of your garden. A small mains-powered electric mower will suffice for compact lawns, while a petrol-driven model may be required for larger lawns.
- If using an electric mower, always fit a circuit-breaker at the mains power supply to avoid the risk of electric shock if the flex is severed accidentally.

STRIMMER

- Strimmers should be used for cutting long grass.
- Petrol-driven strimmers allow greater freedom of movement than electric models and are preferable for larger gardens. Their greater power will also allow you to tackle heavier jobs, such as trimming back thick brush.
- You should wear all recommended safety equipment when using strimmers, and always use a circuit-breaker when operating an electric strimmer. Consult manufacturer's instructions for details.

GRASS RAKE

- Use a grass rake to clear cuttings from small areas.

HAY RAKE

- Use a hay rake to clear large areas of cuttings.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE



- Not cutting grass as short or as frequently allows grasses and other lawn plants such as plantain to seed and provide food for birds.
- Other lawn plants, such as daisies, provide nectar for hoverflies and bees; in addition, bees will also visit buttercups to collect nectar and pollen.
- Long grass provides somewhere for invertebrates to shelter and breed and for their eggs or pupae to survive the winter. Some species of moth and butterfly, as well as craneflies and sawflies, find this valuable. These provide a source of protein-rich food for mammals and birds, and are particularly important for the survival of young chicks.
- When grown against a border or shrub bed, long grass improves conditions beneath the shrubs for invertebrates, which in turn provide food for birds and mammals such as hedgehogs.
- ‘Neglected’ lawns may contain orchids and other scarce plants. They also contain anthills; these provide ideal conditions for wild annual plants to grow and somewhere for insects to bask.
- The ants themselves are beneficial predators of less welcome garden insects and are fed on by birds and other wildlife.



Front: illustration by Chris Shields (RSPB); photos by John Day (RSPB) and Ian Dawson (RSPB). Centre: photos by Nick Droy (RSPB) and Sally Wileman. Back: photos by David Osborn (rspb-images.com) and John Day (RSPB). Regd charity England & Wales no 207076, Scotland no SC037654 380-0087-07-08