



Boost existing grassy areas

Short lawn and turf is of limited value for nature, but can easily be boosted with a few easy steps. Plant flower-rich grassland seeds, bulbs or plug plants in Autumn, then stop mowing over the summer and enjoy the variety of plants and insects you attract. Its relatively cheap and easy to do, with quick results.

Grass and wildflower species will naturally colonise with time if you let grass grow long, but you can speed this up by sowing a flower-rich grassland seed mix or planting small grassland plants.

This guidance document contains everything you need to know to create and look after your flower-rich grassland, to give your site bountiful biodiversity year after year.

If you see a setting on the Nature Park map that has mapped an area of meadow or tall wild plants, consider reaching out to them to learn about the work they have done and get some tips for your own site.



What do we need to do?

- Choose the area of grass you want to enhance
- Prepare your ground by scraping off small or large areas of grass or turf
- Choose and buy grassland seeds and/or plug plants
- Sow the seed or plant plug plants
- Care for your newly planted seeds and plants until they are established
- Don't mow from April to August

Cost

££

Season

Autumn

Impact for nature

High

Key vocabulary

Plug plants

Small young plants grown in very small plant pots, ready to be planted direct into the soil.

Perennial

Plants that come back year after year

Here's some more detailed advice on each of those steps:

Choose the area you want to enhance

Select an area that's in the sun for at least part of the day, as grasslands will not thrive in shaded areas. See the [Shade Mapping](#) activity to involve learners in examining and mapping areas of shade on your site.

When selecting an area, consider how young people will access and enjoy the area – can you create borders of long grass around playing fields or sports pitches, or turn grassy verges into mini-meadows? Strips of long grass are great 'wildlife corridors' for connecting other natural habitats together.



When looking at potential sites, work with your grounds staff (if you have them) to find out how different areas have been managed previously. If an area has been treated with lots of fertiliser in the past, then you may need to reduce the soil quality before planting your grassland.

If you wish to check your soil type before buying plants or seed, this [RHS guide](#) shows you how. You can then buy a seed mix that's tailored for your soil type.

Get creative and involve learners in designing the space.

Prepare the ground

Seed needs to be sown onto bare ground, or the seedlings will fail due to competition with established plants. Evidence suggests that sowing seeds on top of existing grass is unlikely to work very well and can result in wasted time and money. Plug plants can be planted amongst existing grass, but again will be more successful if you clear a small area for them first.

You can make bare ground over a large area of amenity grass, or in strips or small patches, by scraping off the existing grass and the fertile, darker brown topsoil to expose the lighter brown subsoil. This can be done using trowels or spades – you don't usually need to dig very deep; you're just skimming the top 10cm off (approximately). In larger areas, get a contractor in to do this for you using machinery.

Ensure the bare soil surface is fine and crumbly, raked over and watered, ready for planting.

If you have space, you can keep the removed topsoil on site and create a grassy bank ideal for butterflies and moths. More information on how to create a butterfly bank can be found in this [Butterfly Conservation guide \(PDF 12.7MB\)](#).



Choosing plants

Seeds are cheaper but take longer to establish so you may wish to do a combination of sowing seed for fast growing species and annuals and plug plants for slower growing species.

Grassland seed mixes

The [Plantlife Meadows' Hub](#) gives advice on buying native grassland seed and lists of suitable suppliers. Although brightly coloured flowers are appealing, a flowering native grassland mix with lots of perennial plants (ones that come back every year) will be much easier to maintain for the long-term than annual wildflowers that will need re-sowing every year. In small spaces, prioritise seed mixes with fine-leaved grasses like Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*) and Common Bent Grass (*Agrostis capillaris*) over larger species.

You can also encourage local native plants by spreading 'green hay' - fresh clippings from a local grassland collected in late summer.



Plug plants

Buy plants that are grown in peat-free compost, and look for plants of wild, native species, not garden varieties. Plants grown in 9cm diameter pots are harder to find and more expensive than small 'plug' plants but are easier to establish. If you have the space, time and equipment, you could also involve learners in growing their own plants from seed.

Bulbs

If you want to include some garden plants in addition to wild species, planting spring flowering bulbs that naturalise in grass and are attractive to pollinators such as daffodils, crocus, grape hyacinth, camassia and allium is a good option.

Add Yellow-rattle

As your area already has grass growing, plant Yellow-rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), a pretty plant known as the 'meadow-maker'. It weakens dominant grass species and promotes a more diverse plant community. Yellow-rattle is semi-parasitic, feeding on grass roots, so it requires established grass to thrive – but don't worry, it won't ruin the rest of your playing field! Yellow-rattle seed must be sown when it is fresh, where grass already growing, and in the Autumn as it needs a period of cold weather to stimulate it to grow. You can read more on the [Plantlife website](#).



Sowing seed

Flick 1-2 g of seed per square metre over the bare soil. You can mix the seeds with sand to make this easier. Don't cover it but press it in with a roller or by treading/walking on it. This is a great group activity for a class! Autumn is the best time to sow, so the seed is watered naturally by the rain and you don't need to do anything more.

Planting bulbs

Plant spring flowering bulbs in autumn, burying them about three times the depth of the bulb. To get a natural effect, scatter them randomly over the area and plant them where they fall, checking they are not too close together. This is a fun activity for a class.

Planting container-grown plants

Dig a hole to match the shape of the root ball, but slightly deeper, so that the base of the shoot is slightly buried. Creating a cup-shaped depression around the plant to hold water will mean less watering is needed. Autumn is the best time to plant.

Looking after your newly created grassland

Once sown, seed can usually be left to grow. Keep a watch on plug plants, and water if they are wilting. If you have animals such as rabbits, pigeons or pheasants on your site that might eat them you may have to temporarily protect them with wire cages.

Mowing

Leave the grass to grow long from April to August. From late August through to October, mow the grass once and remove the cuttings (the cut grass) a few days later. By removing the cuttings, you will reduce the fertility of the soil which is key to encouraging a wider variety of grassland plants to grow. Leaving it for a few days will allow any seeds and invertebrates in the cuttings to escape. You can mow again through the winter and early spring if you wish but do the final mow of the spring in March.

Connection to surrounding habitats

Grasslands can be created in the smallest spaces and can form useful corridors or stepping stones for wild species to move between natural areas, even if you only have space for a thin strip of grass. Connecting your new grassland to existing natural areas will help species to move in and use the area.



Success in an education setting

Mowing and collecting clippings is the only maintenance needed, so this is a really easy option. Make sure to involve your grounds maintenance teams, so they know you are deliberately growing the grass long - the last thing you want is your area to be accidentally mown! This fits in with the Nature Park whole school approach.

Adding signage can also help to remind grounds staff that you are letting the area grow for nature and communicates your goals to parents and others too – involve learners in designing and creating this signage, or using the [Display a Nature Park Plaque](#) or [Make a Zine](#) activities.

Grasslands thrive when they are not walked on too much. Plant grasses and wildflowers adjacent to paths so they are easy to access and observe. In larger areas, consider mowing paths in curved lines or interesting patterns through the long grass, to provide access for exploration and play whilst leaving other areas un-trampled. You could put a low fence or rope around the outside of the area if you want to indicate that people should not enter a particular area.

Measure and celebrate your achievements!

- [Mapping your site](#) before you change a habitat means you'll be able to visualise and monitor the changes you've made.
- Study what insects you are currently hosting with the [Pollinator Count](#) survey before you enhance your grassland.
- Add your new area of long grass onto the Nature Park map using the [Mapping Change](#) tool. You can upload before and after photos and monitor the impact you are achieving for nature. Your new grassland will then be part of nationwide science research into nature recovery. This tool enables you to see a timeline of change on your site and to start a wildlife survey relevant to the habitat you've created.
- Do the Pollinator Count again once you've grown your grass long, to see the incredible impact you've made.



Health and safety

If you would like to know about any potential health risks associated with garden plants, please see our [Health and Safety](#) and [Selecting Plants Guides](#). If you are in a very rural area or have natural habitats nearby that might be home to livestock or deer, there may be ticks present. If so, please read this [UK Health Security Agency article](#) for advice.

What costs are involved?

The main cost is preparing the ground. There may be a cost associated with removing topsoil if you are working on a large area and/or need a contractor to help. The plants themselves are low cost – seed can be as little as £10 for 20m². Plug plants cost £0.80p-£1.50 per plug plant (the more you buy, the cheaper it is) and these can often only be purchased in the spring. If you really can't wait to see the results, preseeded wildflower lawns or rolls are also available (but are much more expensive at £500 or more to cover 20m² and it must be laid very soon after delivery)!

This guidance has been put together by reviewing academic research and best practice for grassland creation and management, and making sure it is functional for educational settings.



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