

Supporting guidance for Restoration of Species-rich Grassland

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Use this item to restore botanical diversity to species-rich grasslands that have been damaged by practices such as the application of lime, fertiliser or FYM, or the use of herbicides.

Where should I locate this option?

The restoration of species-rich grasslands can be difficult and it is important to choose suitable sites. Restoration sites should retain some signs of species diversity; sites that are dominated by vigorous species such as ryegrass, Yorkshire fog or creeping buttercup are unlikely to be suitable. Where competitive species are present and there is no existing botanical interest, it will be more effective to use the [Creation of Species-rich Grassland](#) capital item.

Low soil fertility is important. High residual nutrient levels (especially phosphate) encourage competitive grasses to grow fast and crowd out smaller species. If in doubt, it is worth doing a simple soil analysis first. Weeds such as creeping thistle and broad leaved dock, can be a problem if you do not control them.

The best fields to select are adjacent to existing species-rich grasslands which can act as a further source of seed.

Which species should I sow?

Choose native Scottish species that naturally grow in your area. They should be of UK origin and preferably of Scottish origin. At least 15 per cent should be herbs, and the rest grasses (but not productive agricultural varieties). Sow the seed at a minimum rate of 5–10kg/ha or 1–2kg/ha of pure wildflower mixture.

A range of seed mixtures are available from reputable wildflower seed merchants, including grazing meadow mixtures, hay meadow mixtures and upland grassland mixtures. The species present in adjacent unimproved areas such as road verges and field margins may help to identify a suitable mixture. Consider also the management planned for the site (cutting or grazing). We recommend you seek advice to help select an appropriate seed mixture.

An alternative source of seed is to use green hay from a nearby species-rich meadow. Cut the hay before its seed begins to fall then transfer it immediately to the prepared ground. Spread it across the site and allow the seed to drop for at least a week, and then remove the hay before it smothers the sward. Bed it in as above.

Yellow rattle

Sowing yellow rattle can help to sustain the diversity of the sward. Yellow rattle is semi-parasitic and takes nutrients from grasses and other nutrient-demanding plants in the sward, making them less vigorous. This creates a more open sward which allows other, less competitive meadow plants, to grow. It is native to the UK and can be found in a range of semi-natural grasslands but particularly species-rich, neutral hay meadows. Yellow rattle is an annual plant which needs to be sown in autumn. It can dominate but is controlled by cutting or grazing in summer. It is mildly toxic and can taint milk.



Yellow rattle (Rhinanthus minor) – © Laurie Campbell, Scottish Natural Heritage

Establishing wildflowers

Prepare the ground before over-sowing it with a wildflower seed mix.

Sowing onto a closed sward is likely to fail because seed does not come into contact with the soil and any seedlings which germinate are out-competed by the existing sward.

First create a short sward by cutting (with cuttings removed) or grazing. Then aim to create 50 per cent bare ground, using discs or tined harrows to reduce competition from the existing sward. Within a few months the sward will recover and very little bare ground will remain. As a guide, the sward should have gaps of at least 10 centimetres in diameter.

Broadcast the seed on to the surface using suitable machinery such as a grass seed box, fertiliser spreader or arable seed drill. Seed can also be sown by hand. If you are working with small amounts of seed you may want to bulk-up the mix with sawdust or fine sand to help distribution. Keep it well mixed in the hopper while spreading.

It is important to bed the seed in. You can do this with a tined harrow, ridged roller or by using sheep or cattle to tread it in.

Managing the grassland

Keep the sward short immediately after sowing the wildflower mix to allow seeds to germinate. This is best done by short periods of intensive grazing. Alternatively, cut the sward and remove the cuttings. Avoid prolonged grazing initially to reduce the risk of seedlings being selectively grazed.

Any perennial weeds which have colonised should be controlled, for example by spot treatment with herbicide. This requires prior written approval. Any annual weeds should be controlled by the regular cutting or grazing outlined above.

Subsequent management should be tailored to the needs of the site. Refer to the [Species-rich Grassland Management](#) or [Habitat Mosaic Management](#) item guidance for further information.

Further information

- [Sward Enhancement: Diversifying Grassland by Over Sowing and Slot Seeding](#) (Natural England)
- [Sward Enhancement: Diversifying Grassland by Spreading Species-rich Green Hay](#) (Natural England)
- [Guide to Types of Species-rich Grassland](#) (Scottish Natural Heritage)
- [Grasslands](#) (Scottish Natural Heritage)

