

Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project



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In the last 80 years, we have lost about 97% of our flowery meadows, mainly due to changes in the way we farm. Meadows contain a changing and colourful array of flowers and fine grasses and they support a lot of wildlife.

Grassy road verges in sunny locations are actually long, thin meadows and, when managed as such, can be filled with a variety of native flowers and other plants.

For many people, verges are their main point of contact with nature, when they drive along roads and lanes. With well-managed verges nurturing a variety of flowers through the season, this can be an uplifting experience. However, when not managed as a meadow, verges can become dark green strips of coarse grasses, Nettles, Hogweed and Thistles, with little variety for mile after mile.

Another key feature of both hedges and verges is that they form corridors which can link isolated pockets of wildlife together – such as nature reserves, traditional meadows or churchyards.

As the effects of climate change become more extreme, many species will need to move in order to survive and these 'habitat corridors' allow this.

Shropshire was once known as a county of outstandingly beautiful verges, but we are fast losing these special flowery verges year by year.

Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project (RSVP) is a local community group determined to bring back the county's verges to their former glory and you can help us to achieve this.

Managing Your Local Verge as a Meadow

Currently many of our road verges are cut too early and cuttings are left in situ. Managing our verges like traditional meadows means cutting at the right time of year and collecting and removing the cuttings.

The County Council is responsible for verge management so contact your local councillor to discuss how and when your verges are cut. Some verge cutting is essential for road safety (eg sightlines, or approaches to junctions, bends and roundabouts). Some communities have formed road verge 'teams' who (in agreement with the local authority) go out and manage their own local verges as meadows.

Some verges need no more help than good management; flowers will increase as conditions improve or they arrive from neighbouring land. Other verges may need a bit more help such as planting Yellow Rattle, a plant that draws nutrients from the surrounding grasses, visibly reducing the height of the grass and allowing flowers to thrive.

When to cut? A rule of thumb is to leave the verge uncut until at least mid-July and then cut and remove the cuttings between July and September, depending on the weather and the condition of the grass. But if you get a good dry window of weather 'make hay while the sun shines' in case you don't get another chance later in the season!

Without cutting, coarser grasses and plants will take hold and eventually turn to scrub and woodland. Without raking or collection of cuttings the verge will become rank and lose meadow species. Mowing too early means plants are cut before they can flower and set seed.

How to cut? How you cut and collect the grass cuttings will depend on the width and length of the verge and what machinery is available. You might scythe or strim, use a robust mower or perhaps a tractor and baler.

What will my verge look like? When people think of wildflower meadows, they sometimes picture a high colour display, full of Poppies and Cornflowers. This does provide a certain level of benefit to our pollinators but comes at a cost and is a high maintenance option, closer to a flowerbed than a traditional wildflower meadow.

Golden Rule: Make sure you collect or rake up the cuttings (these can then be removed for composting). This will gradually reduce the fertility of the verge soil year on year, and wild flowers thrive in areas of low fertility. Nettles, Thistle, Docks and coarse grass thrive in areas of high fertility.

A typical flowery verge is more subtle than this and almost all the plants within it are perennial (continuing from year to year) rather than annual (growing from seed then dying in the autumn).

How long will it take? Once good verge management is underway you can start to see improvements within a year with a reduction in dense, coarse grasses and an increase in finer grasses and flowers, which will improve year on year as the soil fertility reduces.

What happens to the grass cuttings? Can you take the cut grass to the council or other composting facilities? Perhaps there are allotments or gardeners nearby who would take it? If not, then rake into a pile against the hedge and leave it to rot. This will localise the nutrients in one place. Never give grass cuttings to horses or ponies.

What about litter? Regular litter picking may be needed, particularly before cutting as litter can damage blades. Use litter pickers and protective clothing.

Can I plant other wildflowers? Please contact RSVP to discuss suitable native species for planting, then have a go! You might spread green (ie very freshly-cut) hay from a nearby churchyard full of meadow species or collect seed and then spread it after the grass is cut in summer. Perhaps you could grow some seed in pots and plant out as plug plants?

What if dog fouling is an issue? Signage and education may help. If fouling is an issue, grass cuttings should not be used for fodder.

How do I handle public complaints? Signage, education and awareness-raising helps reduce the likelihood of any complaints of 'untidiness' and may lead to positive feedback! Have a point of contact for members of the public.

How do I deal with weeds? Many of our garden 'weeds' are wild flowers, but some are not! Ragwort is great for insects but is a problem in animal fodder, particularly horses, so if your verge is adjacent to livestock you may wish to pull this out and do not use these cuttings for fodder. If you have invasive weeds like Japanese Knotweed, seek advice from the County Council. For other problem plants (such as Hogweed, Rosebay Willow Herb, Bracken, Nettles etc), keep cutting, raking and removing!

I thought Nettles were good for butterflies? There is value for wildlife in species such as Nettles, but this is not such a rare habitat as meadow grassland, so if you can manage as a meadow, then this is the best option for encouraging biodiversity. There is usually room for a few Nettles too!

The banks of my verge are too steep to rake? Many Shropshire lanes have steep banks, and these can be some of the most flowery verges as the grass cuttings fall off without raking, keeping them in good condition, so no management needed here, apart from cutting. Just enjoy the flowers!

My verge goes through woodland? This type of verge won't need managing as a meadow as the grass growth is controlled by the tree canopy shade. If you are lucky, you may have lovely shows of Bluebells, Wild Garlic, Wood Anemones and other woodland flowers in the Spring.

Golden Rule: Keep safe on the verges! Wear hi vis clothing and keep a minimum of one metre in from the kerb. Do not attempt to work on A-roads.

Green Hay Ask the people who cut nearby flowery meadows or the local churchyard if you can take some of the long (fresh) cut grass; a car boot full is sufficient. Rake it up, move it to your verge (which needs cutting very short in advance) and then spread it out as quickly as possible. Leave the hay in place over the winter, to drop seed. Contact the Marches Meadows Group and Caring for God's Acre to find suitable 'donor' sites.

Try Yellow Rattle! Sow Yellow Rattle seed by scraping or scarifying bare patches in your verge so the seed reaches the soil. Sow between June and November in areas where the grass is already quite fine so the germinating plants are not swamped.

Next Steps

Please link up with us at RSVP and check out the help and advice available from Plantlife in their "Good Verge Guide". Don't Mow Let It Grow are based in Northern Ireland and have a great website, Caring for God's Acre give excellent management advice in their Action Pack and, if you live in the Shropshire Hills, please join the Stepping Stones project.

The Marches Meadows Group will also advise on suitable plants and may have some local seed too.

Useful Contacts

Caring for God's Acre
www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk



Marches Meadows Group
www.marchesmeadowgroup.com

Don't Mow Let It Grow
www.dontmowletitgrow.com

Plantlife
www.plantlife.org.uk

Stepping Stones Project
www.nationaltrust.org.uk
(Search for the Stepping Stones project)



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