

◆ WHAT IF I MISS A YEAR?

Failing to cut, bale and remove a hay crop for one year is unlikely to have any long-term effect on the number of wild flowers but it might make the next year's cutting more difficult. If possible, graze it with sheep or cattle, followed by topping or light chain harrowing in the autumn. If the weather forecast is too bad for haymaking, talk to your contractor about cutting and baling your grass as haylage.

◆ IS IT OK TO USE WEED KILLER?

Yes, but only as a spot treatment carefully applied to individual plants to minimise damage to adjacent grasses and flowers⁶.

◆ SHOULD I USE FERTILISER?

No, not even "organic" fertiliser. Increased fertility encourages the growth of weeds and dominant grass species like perennial rye-grass at the expense of finer grasses and wild flowers.

◆ IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I CAN DO TO ENCOURAGE MORE PLANT SPECIES INTO MY FIELD?

Most fields in the Hudnalls and surrounding areas are close enough to other flowery meadows for natural regeneration to start as soon as a hay cutting regime is begun. However, if you want to give nature a helping hand resist the temptation to buy "foreign" wild flower seeds from garden centres. Consider instead spreading green hay from a local field⁷.

This leaflet is intended as a basic, introductory guide to managing weeds in grassland. Much of the information has been extracted from English Nature's 'The Lowland Grassland Management Handbook'. For more in-depth information and details on further reading, you can consult the PGP's copy of this handbook which is available from Peter Chard, 01594 530513 or view it online at www.english-nature.org.uk.

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⁶ See PGP leaflet *Grassland Weed Control*

⁷ See PGP leaflet *Enhancing Your Grassland (Green Hay)*



Brockweir, Hewelsfield and St Briavels Parish Grasslands Project

Hay Meadows

Getting started: a basic guide to managing fields to create wild flower-rich meadows

There are two ways of managing a field to encourage the natural proliferation of wild flowers. One is by light grazing as permanent pasture and the other – the most effective way – is by annual hay cutting, usually with animals grazing the aftermath (the re-growth). Haymaking has declined over the last 50 years as more farms have moved into silage production, with the result that flower-rich hay meadows are now some of the scarcest grassland types remaining in Great Britain.

This leaflet explains the basics of managing a field as a flower-rich meadow and outlines the things you should consider *before* you get started.

◆ IS MY FIELD READY TO BECOME A HAY MEADOW?

If your field has a large percentage of bracken, bramble or scrub it is probably not suitable for hay cutting machinery. If your field is full of badger holes or ant hills, is generally too wet to support a tractor or is so steep that round hay bales will roll away and possibly injure somebody, consider managing your field as pasture¹. If your field has been grazed or mown (topped) for the last two years, then it probably is suitable for the cutting of hay but be aware that any tall, overhanging hedges will hinder the drying of the cut grass². If your grassland has been managed as pasture for a prolonged period (around 10 years), it will have flora and invertebrates that reflect this and it is best to continue with the same management. Converting pasture of long standing to continual hay crops will have an adverse effect on many of the species already present.

◆ WHAT WILL I DO WITH THE HAY?

You need to have arranged, in advance, what will happen to the bales of hay because they need to be kept dry and should not be left to rot in the field. Wild flowers and fine meadow grasses thrive in soil with relatively low fertility and this is achieved over time by the cutting and removal of the hay from the field. The hay must be free of ragwort which is poisonous to most livestock. Any ragwort should be hand-pulled during the growing season and carefully disposed of or spot treated with weed killer in late April or May³. If you are unable to find anyone willing to buy your hay, H.A.P.P.A. at Brockweir would be glad to accept donated, ragwort-free hay – ring 01291 689371.

◆ WHEN SHOULD I CUT THE HAY?

Cut late enough to allow the plants you wish to encourage to flower and set seed; as a guide, after mid-July. Depending on the species, cutting may be as late as September – weather permitting. At least three sunny days are needed to ensure that the hay is dry enough to prevent fungal growth during storage. Drying can be speeded up by turning the hay and by tedding (the

spreading, fluffing up or scattering of hay), both of which help to shed any seeds. Avoid ‘scalping’ the field by low cutting; leave a minimum sward height of 20 cm (8”). If the outer edges of your field are relatively weed free you could leave a one metre strip uncut around the field to act as a wildlife refuge. However, if bracken and bramble are encroaching from the edges it’s a good idea to flail the margins in early summer in order to make the hay cutting easier later on.

◆ WHO WILL CUT HAY FOR ME?

If your field is level, with good access try contacting a local contractor e.g. Nick Davies, Hewelsfield, 07752 321954
John Childs, Hewelsfield, 01594 530046
John & Pete Barnby, St. Briavels, 01594 530845
If your field is small or has difficult, narrow access contact Peter Chard, 01594 530513, about hiring the PGP alpine tractor and driver.

◆ CAN I GET HELP WITH THE COST OF HIRING A CONTRACTOR?

Environmental Stewardship (ES) is a scheme run by Defra to provide financial incentives to land owners to improve the natural beauty and diversity of the countryside. For more details about how to apply ring Defra⁴ or speak to a PGP committee member.

◆ MUST I GET LIVESTOCK TO GRAZE THE AFTERMATH?

Not necessarily. Grazing of hay meadows after the hay cut is beneficial because it keeps coarse grasses in check and because a certain amount of trampling by livestock creates small patches of bare soil which are suitable for seed germination. Grazing by cattle is ideal but sheep, horses and donkeys can also be used if care is taken to prevent overgrazing⁵. By the end of the growing season the aim of grazing is to achieve a varied sward structure with areas of closely grazed turf (5cm high) interspersed with taller tussocks. However, some of the finest, species-rich hay meadows in the district are at Sylvan House, Brockweir and these are maintained without the use of animals, with a single hay cut being taken in mid-August.

¹ See PGP leaflet *Pasture*

² See PGP leaflet *Hedgerow Maintenance*

³ See PGP leaflet *Grassland Weed Control* or visit www.bhs.org.uk

⁴ Defra Helpline 08459 335577

⁵ See PGP leaflet *Pasture*