

## **A brief guide to Meadow Management 2024 - to encourage plant and invertebrate biodiversity.**

**Before making decisions**, survey your meadow/field over a period of at least a year.

Meadows can be managed in several ways, depending on:

- your aims,
- the area of the meadow (mini garden meadow or large farm)
- your resources – including time, available grazing stock, machinery/equipment and money.

Do you need to provide grazing, produce hay, help biodiversity – or all three? If biodiversity is one of your aims, then you can't use pesticides, fertilisers and only a very limited amount of dung!

If you don't do manage your grassland, your field will become tussocky and scrubby, which may be good for invertebrates and mammals, but it will eventually become secondary woodland.

- Graze – with horses, cattle, sheep, even wild deer and rabbits. Horses create rank 'dunging' areas, which can be good for invertebrates and dung beetles. Cattle create mosaics of mini-habitats. Sheep can control tussocky grass – but they do eat flowers!!!
- Cut for hay/silage – this is useful because it **removes** nutrients from a field
- Random cutting and preferably collecting and **removing the grass** etc. Cutting could be by a tractor mower, a ride-on mower, a brush-cutter, a scythe or shears.

### **Managing for wildlife:**

- It is always good to leave at least 25% uncut/ungrazed for plants to seed and invertebrates to breed – but it's best if it's not the SAME 25% every year!
- For max diversity provide a 'mosaic' of mini-habitats – the sort that grazing with a small number of cattle naturally produces,
- For invertebrates, leave some areas long – but move them around to prevent brambles invading.
- Provide natural corridors that wildlife can move along, breed in and spread.
- Thick hedges with 2 metre buffer strips either side are ideal.
- Laying hedges every 12-18 years is ideal for wildlife and provides firewood.
- Banks and pathways provide good habitat for other wildlife.
- Subdividing a field with a new hedge helps wildlife and makes grazing easier.

**Specific problems:** Cutting with a mower leaves a high stubble and isn't as effective as using a brushcutter low, or cutting right at the bottom with shears – or digging out. But digging can damage the sward and provide a perfect seed bed for more tricky 'weeds'. At the very least, cut and bag the seed heads of problem weeds!

**Bracken:** If it is tall (1m or more) and vigorous, then it needs cutting or trampling 3 times a year. Some people pull it, but a bad back isn't one of our aims! Cattle (and people) with big feet do a good job trampling. Bracken is useful for some wildlife – eg violets and fritillary butterflies; it needs control not extinction (impossible!).

**Creeping thistle:** This has fabulous flowers for pollinators – I tolerate it in some places, but try to control its spread; it can spread fast! If you have fairly small amounts, then choose a patch and concentrate your time on cutting/pulling (watch your back) about three times a year, maybe April, June, August. Cut a minimum of twice a year.

**Brambles:** **Also** very useful to pollinators and other wildlife in the right place. Cut problem areas really low at least 3-4 times a year.

### **Fertile/fertilised grassland:**

- Mow and remove the grass as often as possible before you try to introduce plant species – for 2-3 years if possible.
- If there are less fertile areas (where the vegetation is lower), sow seeds here.
- Or dig small areas (600mm square) of turf out and seed. Put turf in the hedgebank or similar.
- Sow yellow rattle