

grasslands and farming

Origins of our Grassland Heritage

Before trees took over the land, after the ice receded from Ireland, the country was host to vast tracts of grassland. Here lived the giant Irish deer and the wolves that hunted them.

When humans started clearing the woodlands for agriculture about 5000 years ago, they introduced cattle and these grasslands returned. Cattle and grass are still a major part of our economy today.



Over the last 50 years, wild flowers and grasses have been pushed out by more aggressive rye-grasses in richly fertilised pastures. The change from hay to silage as a fodder crop has changed the mowing times of grasslands. This has led to the near extinction of some wild flowers and birds, such as the corncrake.

With the intensification of agriculture, many grassland plants and animals now live in uncultivated land along roads, field boundaries, rivers and streams. There is also a growing tendency to grow native Irish wildflower species in wildflower gardens or meadows.

Road Margins

With many of the grassland habitats gone or over-fertilised, road margins can play a part in providing areas for grassland flora and fauna.

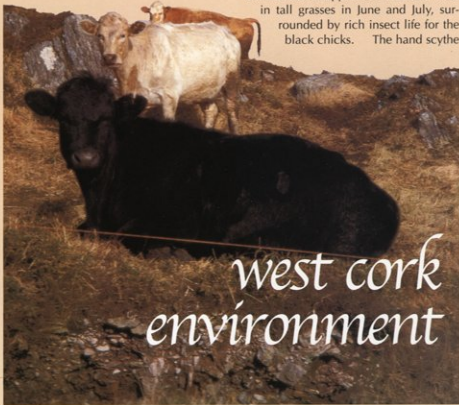


Roadside flowers between Schull and Goleen.

Cemeteries too can provide habitats for wildlife away from the pressures of biocides, fertilisers and lawn mowers. It is not essential to keep cemeteries mown short in all places, a meadow area requires less mowing and attracts beauty to it if properly managed.

Hay Meadows

The traditional hay meadow is almost entirely a thing of the past in West Cork. Silage making is seen as more reliable in our damp climate. A species once common in West Cork was the corncrake, now all but disappeared. This bird nests in tall grasses in June and July, surrounded by rich insect life for the black chicks. The hand scythe



or horse drawn mowers allowed time for the comcrake to escape late summer mowing, but quicker mowers and earlier mowing seasons have led to their demise. The Irish Wildlife Trust has a wildflower meadow campaign and information on comcrakes and other wildlife habitats.

Profile

Bob Allen, near Skibbereen, farms without artificial fertilisers or biocides.



A flame hoe keeps down the weeds around his potatoes.

One of his crops is Melissa, better known as lemon balm. It is grown for its essential oil.

Intensive Farmland

The majority of farmland in the West Cork area is intensive farmland, "improved" pasture and tillage. These fields make up the bulk of the countryside and their management can have significant consequences for conservation, positive or negative. Initiatives such as the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS) are designed to enhance and encourage protection of the environment on participating farms.

Wild patches by ditches, streams and woods provide shelter for hedgehogs and blackbirds. Nettles provide a habitat for caterpillars and for adult butterflies of many species. Sparrow hawks patrol the sky over open farmland by day. By night the barn owl keeps rat and mice populations under control. Loss of habitat and poisoning by poisoned rats has reduced barn owl numbers, but nesting boxes in farm sheds can encourage them to return and keep rats under

Action



When tidying, leave enough wild area for nature to have a place. Wildlife gardens have been used to good effect in West Cork.

control naturally, supplemented by traps instead of poison.

Tidy Towns

The Tidy Towns competition has helped many towns and villages around the country to get the community together to improve the appearance of the locality. Sometimes the rough areas of road margins or old buildings can be over-tidied. The wildlife value of these rough areas is often overlooked when the tidying begins. The wildflower meadow in Clonakilty is specifically managed to encourage wildflowers and the insects and animals that inhabit these areas, such as bees, butterflies and birds.

Urban Gardens

Our gardens are all too often carefully manicured. Even fertiliser, herbicides and pesticides are sometimes used in an effort to beautify gardens.

Many lawns, left to their own devices, or mowed at one or two carefully timed intervals per year, produce wildflowers from the seed bank in the soil. By reducing the cropped lawn area slightly and leaving designated areas for wildflower meadows, a wealth of butterflies and birds can be attracted to the wildflower garden. A pond can be an additional wildlife oasis for the garden. See section three.

Profile



Pat O'Sullivan of Cork County Council manages the Park in Carrigaline. "We set out to attract wildlife to the area and to allow people to enjoy wildlife close to the town".

Wildflower verges and meadows can be easier and cheaper to manage and just as beautiful as large areas of lawn. In Carrigaline town park the county council avoid mowing around the trees in the verge. The grasses and flowers that grow here add an extra dimension to the park. This management regime works particularly well in industrial-estates, golf-courses and parks.

Action - Creating a Meadow Habitat



Cut only in late June or early July, spring meadows encourage cowslips, bugle, daisy, self-heal, ox-eye daisy and meadow buttercup. Summer meadows left uncut between April and late September support field scabious, knotweed, ox-eye daisy, yarrow and wild carrot.

If you need extra variety in the wildflower garden, try to find seed from local areas. Never take more than is needed or in excess of 10% of the wild seeds. If buying wildflower seed, be very sure to select only native Irish and representative of the locality.