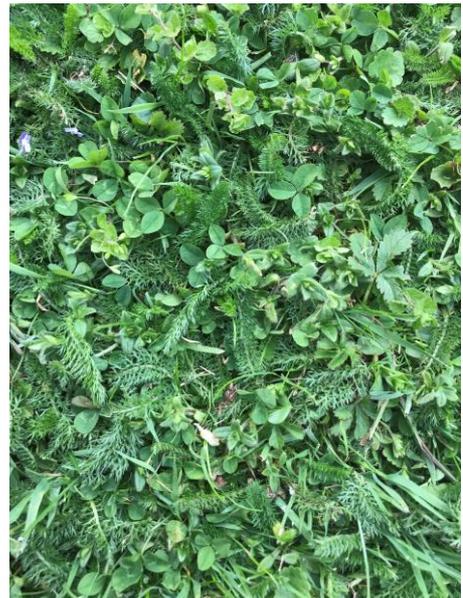


The Lawn: To mow or not to mow – that is the question

“Ensna’r’d with flowers, I fall on grass”. Andrew Marvell, *The Garden*

Could the time be ripe for experimenting with leaving your lawn as well as your hair to grow? A perfect moment to ignore what the neighbours think? An opportunity to let nature breathe? Walking over lush and spongy multi-species grass in France last summer, I remembered the scorcher of 2018 which turned our lawn at home into a parched and burnt desert and encouraged me to add a few wildflower seeds that autumn. I reflected on the difference between the two and now I have a choice. Our lawn can be an Axminster perfect green carpet which may well get singed. Or it could be a textured tapestry of a thousand separate plants. The lawn could feed birds and insects, as well as hosting flowers. And I can still mow, sit or play on it. I can choose to call ‘weeds’ wildflowers. I can maintain it organically – without using the unnecessary and expensive chemicals of ‘weed and feed’ – and I can even enhance it with added colour.

Surely most lawns were like this photograph before the 1940s? Is it just a matter of fashion? Maintaining a weed-free lawn before the advent of selective herbicides would have required an immense amount of work. Look in any garden centre, and there is shelf after shelf of lawn ‘improvement’ poisons: they have successfully brainwashed a generation or two that the immaculate lawn is essential. Before the advent of herbicides, it would have been almost impossible to remove clover, for example, from your lawn. Instead of fertilisers, clover, a nitrogen fixer, was surely feeding the sward naturally. It begs the question, who has been leading the fashion for a must-have, single-species, chemically engineered lawn? Has the time come for us to allow a naturally engineered lawn, with us working in partnership with nature rather than constantly fighting her.



On a closer look at which species had survived my lawn's previous regime I found patches of blue germander speedwell (*Veronica chamaedrys*), quite a bit of ferny leaved yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), a little self-heal (*Prunella vulgaris*) and Ground Ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*) and it was threaded through with white clover (*Trifolium repens*), all native wildflowers. More than I had anticipated! The grasses are primarily fine fescues and bents. I had a choice and could either let the grass grow and see what happened. Or, I might seek out seed of low-growing

meadow wildflowers such as Birdsfoot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Bulbous Buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*), Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), Ragged Robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) and Cowslip (*Primula veris*) and perhaps add more seed of some of those previously mentioned. At this point, scarifying or raking to promote bare patches will help, perhaps an opportunity to scratch



out some moss, enabling seed to fall directly on the soil. The time is ripe to scatter seed in spring as soon as the ground warms or, as JG told me, the local wisdom is to sow when you are happy to sit 'butt-naked' on the soil – probably around the end of April or early May. You can apply the same test towards the end of the year to decide whether it is too late to sow.

There are several other methods of enhancing your lawn with flowers, one or two of which are worth thinking about at this point. Using well rooted plants tends to be more reliable than seed and we have had success in Three Haggles Woodmeadow by cutting out a square foot of turf, turning it over and planting a group of three strong plants into each square, not forgetting to water them in. If you think you are in the meadow making game for the long-term, later in the year you may wish to add Yellow Rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), known as 'the meadow maker' or 'nature's lawnmower', a particularly useful annual plant to establish when creating a wildflower sward. Its roots develop underground and seek out the roots of plants growing nearby, especially grasses, from which it then draws water and nutrients. This reduces the vigour of the grasses by up to 60%, giving other flowers space to grow. However, Yellow Rattle seed needs to vernalise, that is to go through a period of winter cold in order to germinate, so add it any time between hay cutting and Christmas. As it's an annual, should you decide against it or find you have too much, all you need to do is mow it off.

The next choice to make is how to manage the cutting of the lawn. I shall be sure to cut a strip each week around the outside edge of my lawn, a priority to prevent the grasses seeding into any of the surrounding beds or gravel path. Then I can either mow the whole every 2-3 weeks down to 5 cm, collecting up the arisings when possible, though sometimes finely mulching - particularly when it is hot and dry. Or I can let it grow into a taller meadow sward and take, in effect, a 'hay cut', probably around early to mid-July (or as soon as the yellow rattle is ripe and rattling) which is what I am opting for.

Not having cut the lawn since December last year and the grass now finally beginning to grow, it is time to design my paths across. Last year I tried a bold cross of wide walks with a circle in the middle. This year I am going for a more informal look, a meander of tracks just one cut wide so I can weave my way through and connect with the main routes around the garden. After the hay cut, if social distancing is relaxed, I shall keep one area cut short each week as a croquet lawn, and the rest mow every few weeks or if there are no footballers turning up, leave it to flower a second time in September. It can feel cruel to cut in July and be tempting to leave the first cut till September, but as a general rule in order to advantage the flowers (which have evolved through grazing), it is better to be cruel to be kind – and enjoy a second coming. You can, of course, play with all these options and see which works best.



Taking off long grass can be a bit of a challenge for the regular garden mower. If you opt for the meadow length, depending on the size of your lawn, it is ideal to scythe it by hand or find a small drum or scythe mower which, rather than mulching it, cuts the sward at the bottom into easily gatherable rows. At this point, I put out a call for rabbit and his relations to help rake up the arisings. (If you find yourself raking up on your own, practice being ambidextrous, so you don't crook your body and remind yourself how much time you have saved not mowing it all each week.) This important step helps reduce the fertility of the lawn, in turn preventing the grasses from outcompeting the thrifty wildflowers. If you leave it a day or two before you pick it up, there will be less bulk. However, best not leave it any more than a week or the vegetation will start to leach nutrients back into the soil. The next step is finding somewhere to dispose of the hay, remembering, there is always use for compost in a garden. To transport it, try forking it – a pitchfork is much lighter and easier than a garden fork – into large dumpy bags from a builders' merchant, easily carried between two. I suspect it would be wise to ensure the compost heap gets hot enough to kill the seeds by turning it and covering it. I gather seed won't survive a sustained hot composting temperature of over 60°C, so I have just bought a soil thermometer to test my pile.

At first, the lawn looks very uneven and tatty, but I keep the paths and edges neat and tidy and relish the growing contrast. Patience and a degree of stubbornness are useful to make friends with on the journey to create a meadow – the sward mix will gradually adjust itself. If I manage it consistently, I know it will get better over time. The lawn will soon start to take on a life of its own, and there will be bees, birds and butterflies enjoying it that I would never have seen there before. Perhaps best of all are the sounds and smell when you take a moment to lie down in it and slumber.

Jane Memmott's thoughts along similar lines caught my eye recently

<https://www.britishecologicalsociety.org/why-the-british-ecological-society-president-mows-round-the-dandelions-in-her-lawn/> , and I love Dave Goulson's book The Garden

Jungle or Gardening to Save the Planet

[https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/111/1117058/the-garden-](https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/111/1117058/the-garden-jungle/9781784709914.html)

[jungle/9781784709914.html](https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/111/1117058/the-garden-jungle/9781784709914.html) . Dave has nurtured his lawn as a garden meadow for over twelve years and describes brilliantly all the wildlife that lives right under our noses. There

is more advice from the RHS here too [https://www.rhs.org.uk/about-the-](https://www.rhs.org.uk/about-the-rhs/publications/the-garden/2018-issues/july/garden-solutions-let-your-lawn-go-wild.pdf)

[rhs/publications/the-garden/2018-issues/july/garden-solutions-let-your-lawn-go-](https://www.rhs.org.uk/about-the-rhs/publications/the-garden/2018-issues/july/garden-solutions-let-your-lawn-go-wild.pdf)

[wild.pdf](https://www.rhs.org.uk/about-the-rhs/publications/the-garden/2018-issues/july/garden-solutions-let-your-lawn-go-wild.pdf). If you are tempted by the idea of trying out a bit of citizen science, you, and others

in your family with you, could get involved in the Plantlife survey of garden lawns, Every

Flower Counts <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/everyflowercounts/>.

Please share a photo or two of your results by email enquiries@woodmeadowtrust.org.uk

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