

Managing wild flowers, especially the first year

Year 1

Management in the first year after sowing is hugely important. Wild flowers grow at very different speeds. Oxeye daisies grow quickly, cowslips and lady's bedstraw grow very slowly. There will still be annual weeds around such as poppies which will exclude light from the developing wild flowers unless the meadow is topped (mown) a couple of times. When it reaches 15 inches (welly height), cut it back to 5 inches. If you leave 5 or 6 inches of growth, it ensures that yellow rattle can flower and set seed (it is an annual). Once you get to July, you can relax.

Remember - YOU NEED TO CUT OFF THE EARLY FLOWERS IN THE FIRST YEAR!

People complain that just as they are about to enjoy their first oxeye daisies, we are telling them to cut them off. This is especially important on fertile soils.

Subsequent years

Timing of the cut

The traditional time for the hay cut was always towards the end of July, but nowadays it has slipped a bit into August as we are more concerned with the visual effect than with the quality of the forage. The key aim is to allow the plants to flower and set seed. This particularly suits yellow rattle. The best way to cut a meadow is with a tractor mower rather than a topper or ride on.

Collecting the cut material

A significant management requirement is the removal of any cut material when the meadow has been cut. If it is left *in situ*, the cut material builds up in the bottom of the sward in the form of a 'thatch', which prevents seed from getting into contact with the soil. Cutting without collecting up results in species declining.

Variation on the July/August hay cut

You can extend the flowering time of your meadow by the simple method of cutting or mowing part of it through until the end of May. Cutting little and often avoids having to collect the cut material. This will extend the nectar period for 4-6 weeks and greatly benefit insect life.