

# Creating the ultimate... *wildflower margin*

## DID YOU KNOW?

New research has shown that we need to include more plant species, including weeds, to support wild bees than traditionally thought, so leaving scruffy areas or allowing weeds to survive in the crop also has value. Top weeds include bristly oxtongue, corn poppy, charlock, dandelions, dead nettles (lamium species), perennial sow-thistle, smooth hawkbeard, scentless mayweed and bindweed. Hedge-row plants should also be encouraged such as hogweed, angelica, wild parsnip and primrose.



John Holland is our head of farmland ecology and has carried out many years of research into different farming systems, cover crops and beneficial insects.

These days farmers face many pressures including producing food sustainably and using more natural ways of controlling pests now key insecticides have been banned. Planting wildflower margins can help as they support pollinators and natural enemies of pests, sequester carbon and brighten up the landscape. However, they can be tricky to establish and manage, so here are a few basic principles that can help.

- ③ **Location:** Select sites that don't have existing noxious weed problems. Less fertile soils are better at discouraging grasses that can quickly swamp broadleaved plants. Choose sunny spots away from woodland with hungry deer and sow wide areas to avoid ingress from the edges.
- ③ **Seed choice:** Mixes can be designed to support bumblebees, natural enemies of pests and parasitic wasps ([www.gwct.org.uk/flowersforbees](http://www.gwct.org.uk/flowersforbees)). Select plant species appropriate for the soil type and climate; seed companies can tailor mixes to your conditions. If plants already occur on the farm, this is a good guide to their likely successful establishment or source local green hay as another option. Grasses can be included but usually establish anyway.
- ③ **Establishment:** Having too thick a cover of weeds can prevent wildflowers establishing. To reduce their density, repeat the process of cultivating and letting weeds emerge before broadcasting on to a fine seedbed then roll.
- ③ **Sow when warm and into a moist soil,** which can be March/April or August/September or in-between avoiding dry periods. Seed companies can advise on seed rates for the site conditions.
- ③ **Management:** Mow to 4-5cm several times during the first year as soon as annual weeds start to dominate, though not if yellow rattle has established. Remove cuttings if there's a lot of debris or mow more frequently and leave them. In following years cut annually – July/early August is best to encourage flowering plants. Avoid cutting all areas at the same time to ensure that flowers are constantly present. Removing the cut vegetation is critical otherwise the debris will smother those carefully nurtured and expensive wildflowers. Once a few areas have been successfully established then the green hay can be used to establish new areas.

For a specific list of flowers and a guide to habitat creation and management for pollinators see [www.gwct.org.uk/flowersforbees](http://www.gwct.org.uk/flowersforbees).