



Planting verges in Reading for Pollinators

There are various projects and campaigns underway across England to reduce the regular cutting of roadside verges and hence improve biodiversity and provide routes for wildlife to move through the towns. In particular, this is to increase flowering plants to encourage pollinators.

Whilst some people would like to see longer verges, others find this “messy” and complain to the council if they reduce cutting rates. There is also an issue with litter being retained in long grass and with dog owners seeing this as an unmanaged area for use as a toilet.

In addition, there is a problem with the grass mowings. If the grass is left long for extensive periods, then annual cutting may be done with strimmers or flail mowers, depending upon the width. Removing the cuttings is a separate job with additional expense. It is rarely done except for small areas. Long grass left on roadside verges is unsightly and, more importantly, tends to shade out some of the flowering plants and encourage the “thugs”. These verges tend to become a mixture of very few species that don’t provide benefits to a range of insects throughout the summer, and also tend to be unsightly for chunks of the year thus reducing public acceptance.

Keeping longer roadside verges to benefit wildlife is not a simple or cost-neutral activity for the council to achieve.

This pilot project is taking a different approach. We want to find out whether we can incorporate low flowering plants within roadside verges, let the council continue with its current mowing regime leaving the short mowings in situ, keep residents happy, and still improve the habitat for pollinators. If successful, then this is something that can be rolled out across urban areas without a maintenance cost for councils.

Many low-growing flowering plants, such as clovers, bird’s foot trefoil and ladies bedstraw, will flower at very low height above ground, and will cope with fairly close mowing to flower a second or third time. Other species, such as cat’s ear, throw up a quick flower after each mowing. For a number of pollinators, a flower at 6cm above the ground is just as good as one at a metre. Naturally, the close mown grass does not offer the nesting sites that long grass verges would give, and does not suit some hoverflies, butterflies and bee species that prefer to be further off the ground, but it may be a partial solution for urban areas. Perhaps we can look at this system being the one that connects up the urban woodlands and bigger local authority areas where some areas of longer grass can be managed.

We know that some plants will cope with close mowing and still flower. These are the ones being grown for the research. What we don’t know is:

- Can we provide pollen and nectar through the summer with a selection of plants?

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- Will plant A grow at the expense of plant B and reduce the variety over time? (for example, yarrow with outgrow almost everything, and then not flower between monthly mowings)
- If we can't maintain a continuum of flowering, can we provide food for insects early in the year, during the June dearth of flowers in gardens, and at the end of the summer?
- Is the standard grass in the grass verge too strong to allow plug plants to establish?
- What variants are needed for different soil types and areas with trees/extra drainage.

That's the plan; this is what we'd like you to do.

Identify an area of roadside verge outside your house, or on the way home from work. This needs to be near enough for you to visit weekly and more than three metres by 1 metre in size without a junction box, telegraph pole, large tree with root system that has obviously used up all the moisture and nutrients, or other things that interfere with mowing practices. It also needs to be somewhere where people do not park on the roadside verge and cut it up.

Be willing to:

1. Receive a tray of plug plants to put into your patch in March/Early April. Maximum number to plant in one location would be 27 (3 square metre plot). (you can of course adopt more than one plot)
2. Plant the plugs at a rate of 9/square metre and water them in.
3. If we have no rain during the first month, water the plug plants
4. Have a look, preferably once a week, and fill in the data form showing
 - a. Which plants are in flower?
 - b. Are you seeing insects on the flowers of different plants? (this is at the level of bees, flies, hoverflies, butterflies or moths; you do not need to identify specific species)
 - c. Was the grass mown by the council this week.
 - d. Have any plants plant died
5. Tell us when you are going on holiday for more than two weeks or get fed up with the survey, so that we can get someone to continue the record
6. Tell us if the plot is looking spectacular and full of insects so that we come to identify them and take photos (or take photos yourself)

We intend to have several specific planting days where conservation volunteers would be around to help with the planting, and I will help with some of them, but can't promise help to all. We have bulb planters to help get out a plug of soil to make planting easy.

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Interested? then send an email or phone call to tricia on tricia@marcouse.com 0118 9268341 and I will arrange to come and see you to look at the plot and chat further.

Not all areas are suitable. We need to find a mixture of sunny sites, shady sites, chalky sites etc to work out what works best where, and I also need to be sure that the council, gas board, water authority etc do not have plans to dig up the street and park machinery on the verge after planting

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