

Habitat a la carte

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We made counts of flower-visiting insects and found that there were 50 times as many in the long-grass area than the short-grass area. This was a good result for the flowers and the insects. But what did the public using the park think?

By interviewing park users, we found that the most popular recreation activities were to relax (42%), walk (42%), walk the dog (63%), take children to play (45%), look at plants (18%), look at insects (21%) and 'other' 8%. (Many people did more than one thing.) Importantly, looking at plants and insects were popular.

Most people (61%) had noticed the change in management, the wildflowers in the long grass (72%) and also bees or butterflies (79%). Almost all (97%) thought it was good to encourage insects and wildflowers. Most (74%) said that the amount of long grass was appropriate, some (23%) said it was too much, and 3% too little. As we all know, you cannot please everyone but over three times more respondents were happy than not.

These results show that many local park users enjoyed looking at nature in the park including flowers and insects, noticed what was going on and supported efforts to help nature. A key reason that most people were happy was no doubt because half the park remained as short grass. This gave ample space for activities such as ball games and strolling.

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Nowadays, the word wildflower is often used to sell seed mixes that can include non-native species. These may be wildflowers in some part of the world, such as the North American prairies, but often they are not wildflowers where they are planted. In other cases, they may be native species but with seed gathered in a different country. True wildflowers are those native to the local area. Planting 'wildflower' seeds is much the same as planting out an area with bedding plants, and indeed considerable time and effort must be spent preparing the ground to receive the seeds. In addition, many of these 'wildflowers' are annuals giving a burst of colour that declines in subsequent years. By contrast, many bee-friendly wildflowers are perennials.

Wildflowers in a suburban lawn

Even a small patch of garden, lawn, field edge, or roadside might have multiple wildflower species that bees and insects will visit when in bloom. In late June, we studied a small patch (161m²) of lawn that had been uncut for two weeks in a suburban garden in Uckfield, a small town in Sussex, (Ratnieks & Flockhart 2020). In bloom were ten native species, none of which had been planted. Six were abundant and four (white clover, red clover, bird's-foot trefoil



'Local native wildflower' or simply 'local native' convey the key idea. But is it too clumsy or ill-defined? What better term could be used?

Is a lawn with wildflowers in addition to grass attractive or ugly? Is it a sign of a lazy person or someone who is encouraging nature? Is it something to enjoy and celebrate or to criticise? It is certainly easier, cheaper and probably safer to enjoy the existing wildflowers in a lawn than to go to the cost and trouble of removing them with herbicides, and especially to pay a 'lawn care' company to do it for you.

Long grass is probably not suitable for most domestic gardens, unless the lawn is large. But it is an option for roadsides and parks, as the example of the Saltdean Oval showed. One challenge with long grass is that it can give the impression that the landowner or council is not managing the area properly. One way round this is to mow paths to 'frame' the long grass areas to show that it is being managed and to ease access.

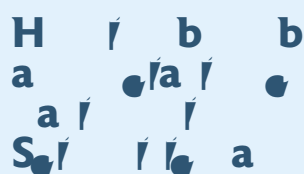
Education, in the broadest sense, might help to increase public appreciation of local native wildflowers. This could be via almost any method, whether formal or informal, and to any age group, including school pupils. Educating the public to appreciate local native wildflowers has every chance of success. Many people probably do not realise that there already are wildflowers everywhere, and this would be a good place to start. They do not have to be expensively planted using commercial seeds (probably sourced from other countries or even of non-native species) after preparing the soil. The study at the Saltdean Oval showed that encouraging the local native wildflowers already present was simple and popular. No planting was needed, and the only management was simply mowing less often.

Many underappreciated local native wildflowers already have signs of appreciation beyond their value as nectar and pollen sources to bees and other insects. Blackberries are probably the most widely eaten of all wild foods in Britain. Ivy is liked because it is evergreen. It is also a girl's name which shows the high esteem it is held in.

Spear thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*), one of the injurious weeds, is the national flower of Scotland. Ragwort was eulogised by English poet John Clare (1793-1864) in his poem *The Ragwort*: "Ragwort, thou humble flower with tattered leaves/I love to see thee come and lier gold ...". Many of the local native wildflowers that will grow in lawns are beautiful individually and can even result in spectacular

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From page 6



Scientific papers

Below are the articles cited on pages 6–11.

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