

Flowers on the verge: Planting on countryside road verges

Introduction

This information note aims to promote good practice among those considering planting road verges in the countryside.

Planting trees and flowers on road verges is becoming increasingly popular. Done correctly, these planting schemes can bring more colour and wildlife into the countryside. However, inappropriate schemes may have an adverse impact on local countryside character, wild plants and animals.

Consult others

It is essential to obtain permission from the highways authority, which will require full details of the planting scheme and how it will be maintained. The authority will need to consult its records to find out if the verge is a nature reserve, if there are buried cables or services present and to determine whether the verge could be affected by future road maintenance or other operations. If permission is granted you may be required to follow health and safety guidance and indemnify the authority against damages and accidents. (Public liability insurance may also be required.)

You may need permission from the adjacent landowner – who is likely to have land ownership rights over part of the verge, and may cut the verge and the adjacent hedge.

If you do not have sufficient expertise, consult an ecologist or other countryside adviser for expert guidance. The ecologist will help to assess the site and advise on suitable native species to plant, and how to establish them.

Consider maintenance

Before designing the scheme, consider resources and logistics for maintaining planted flowers and trees. What management will be required? Who will do it? What are the costs, and who will pay? After-care is often neglected because no one accepts responsibility for it.

Assess the site

During the spring and summer check for the presence of wild flowers typical of important habitats such as old grassland, heath, ancient hedgerow, woodland or bogland. If there are indicator species present, planting would be inappropriate.

In areas already rich in wild flowers, it may be possible to restore verges simply by instigating a suitable regime of mowing, followed by removing grass cuttings. Consider this approach first before thinking about planting or sowing wild flowers.

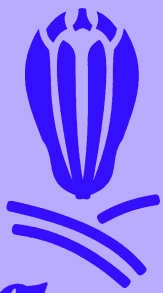
Water-filled ditches are valuable habitats and may also have a road drainage function, so it is best to avoid planting around them. They should never be infilled.

Check for the use of the site by protected species such as Badger and Great Crested Newt. (It is an offence, without a licence, to disturb the habitats of these species, to relocate, kill or injure them.)



Road verges that support native wild flowers, such as this chalk grassland verge, should be managed by mowing. This will help to restore and maintain their native flora. Planting trees, daffodil bulbs or other flowers (cultivated or native) would be inappropriate here.





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Consider the character and distinctiveness of the landscape. Any planting should aim to enhance this "natural" character. Tree planting, for example, can be inappropriate within open downland or moorland landscapes. To find out about your local countryside character or natural area (England) see www.magic.gov.uk, www.ccnetwork.org.uk and www.english-nature.org.uk/science/natural/NA_search.asp.

The underlying geology and soils may influence what plants will be most suitable for the site, so consider these when deciding what to plant.

Is the verge wide and sunny? Shady verges are usually unsuitable for planting. Narrow verges adjacent to busy roads, arable land, or intensively managed grassland, suffer from high fertility and are usually choked with rank grass and tall herbs such as Cow Parsley, Hogweed and Stinging Nettle. These are also unsuitable for planting flowers.

Selecting flowers and trees to plant

For any planting schemes in the countryside, British native species should always be used for projects in Britain. The decision on what species to plant should be taken by someone knowledgeable about native plants, such as an ecologist, a conservation officer at the local wildlife trust, or the local Botanical Society of the British Isles recorder.

The species chosen should be appropriate to the soil and locality (i.e. species that already grow in the area in natural habitats). Suitable trees may include English or Sessile Oak, Ash, Beech, Holly and Field Maple (Scot's Pine in the Scottish Highlands).

Verges on this new bypass, in the Thames Basin and Heaths Natural Area, were hydroseeded with wild native heather seed, to restore a native heathland habitat. The nature conservation plan was rapidly undermined when another department of the highways authority decided to plant swathes of cultivated daffodil – pretty, but out of place in this heathland landscape. Finally, failure to regularly mow the establishing heathland, resulted in the whole verge being overcome by gorse, birch and pine.



If planting wild flowers, unless the area to be planted is stripped down to the subsoil, only species that can survive in tall grassland should be planted. Examples include Meadow Cranesbill (lime-rich soil), Greater Knapweed (limestone or chalk areas), Musk Mallow (well-drained sites), Ladies Bedstraw (all soil types), Sweet Cicely (north England) or Meadowsweet (damp soil).

Please keep the garden out of the countryside

Cultivated varieties of daffodils, Spanish Bluebell, tulips and other garden plants have no place in the countryside. These plants are fine within the curtilage of towns and villages, but in the countryside they can threaten related wild plants and reduce the local distinctiveness of an area.

Obtaining seed and plants

If there are suitable native grasslands in the area, seed could be collected from these. Permission should be sought from the landowner unless the wild flowers are on road verges.

Otherwise, crop-grown wild flower seed or plants grown in cultivation can be purchased and used. Similarly, in areas where there are old hedges and ancient woodland, trees or shrubs of local origin should be purchased, preferably from a supplier who follows the Forestry Commission voluntary identification scheme for native trees and shrubs.



Seed or plants (including trees or shrubs) that are purchased should be source-identified (i.e. the supplier should guarantee that the material is of British native origin and provide information on the locality of origin). A list of suppliers claiming to sell suitable plants and seed is available on the *Flora locale* and *Treetrader* websites.

Within ecologically sensitive zones, such as islands or near important natural habitats, plants or seed of local origin should be used.

Trees to be planted should be transplants or whips. Larger trees are more likely to suffer from transplant shock or root damage, and ideally require watering. Only plant larger trees if someone will agree to water them.

Health and safety

Regard to health and safety of volunteers, employees and road users is imperative when doing any work on road verges. Appropriate risk assessments should be carried out and implemented. This may necessitate wearing protective and high visibility clothing, using hazard warning signs and providing instruction to contractors and/or volunteers involved in ground works and planting.

Ground preparation and planting

Wild flowers will not survive on many verges unless the fertility is reduced by stripping away the surface soil, or removing turves. Wild flower seed can be directly broadcast on to bare ground; do not bury the seed but trample or roll the seed to bring it into contact with the soil surface. Bare ground can also be exposed by using a rotavator or suitable weed killer.

Seed could be propagated to produce plug plants (or plugs can be purchased) and subsequently planted into treated areas of open ground where the plants will not be swamped by surrounding grass.



Garden Polyanthus are out of place on this Cotswold road verge – a region where the native Cowslip is a characteristic wild flower. The wrong plants are often used because they are not obtained from a specialist grower of native flora. Many nurseries will also substitute what was ordered for what they have in stock.



Native shrubs, such as Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), are attractive in spring and produce berries for birds in the autumn.

Maintenance

Young trees will need protection from rabbits and deer with suitable guards, and a 1-metre weed-free area maintained for the first three years – use a polypropylene mulch when planting, or spray ground vegetation with weedkiller twice a year (April and between June and September). Tree guards and ties should be regularly checked and removed when no longer needed.

Wild flower plug plants must be watered if conditions are dry after they have been planted.

Verges restored or developed for grassland wild flowers must be mown, preferably twice a year, and the cuttings raked off. A late cut between August or mid-September is suitable for lowland sites, while verges in upland areas will benefit from a September cut. An additional spring cut, even if every other year, can also be beneficial and will prevent summer flowers from being swamped by tall grasses and herbs. Verge maintenance must be properly organised and agreed with the relevant highways authority.

Further information

Local organisations who can help

The Local Wildlife Trust may already have a road verge initiative in place and staff will have good local knowledge. See the local phone book or obtain details from www.wildlifetrusts.org

The local highways authority is the county, unitary or city council. There will be a highways department, but the authority's ecologist, if there is one, will often be based in the planning department.

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Go Native! Planting for biodiversity. Guidelines for planting projects in the countryside. Available to download free. Also, lots of information on the wise use of native flora including links to many other useful websites, lists of native flora suppliers and technical information on wild flower grassland creation and planting all types of native flora.

Tree planting

www.treetrader.co.uk: for nurseries able to supply source-identified British native trees and shrubs
www.british-trees.com or www.the-tree.org.uk for information on British native trees.

BTCV. *Tree planting and aftercare: A practical handbook.* ISBN 0946752257, Tel: 01302 522200 to order.

www.nufu.org.uk: National Urban Forestry Unit – resources on all aspects of tree planting.

Countryside character

www.ccnetwork.org.uk; www.magic.gov.uk: geographic information about local landscape, environment and wildlife designations in England.

www.english-nature.org.uk/science/natural/NA_search.asp: information about English Natural Areas

www.snh.org.uk/futures/Data: Scottish natural heritage zones

www.ccw.gov.uk: check the Countryside Council for Wales website to find out about the LANDMAP interactive character map for Wales.

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