

Edrington goes back to good old haymaking days

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Derek Robeson

BERWICKSHIRE farmer Jim Macfarlane manages Edrington Mains farm near Foulden.

Jim and the landowner, Michael Thornhill, have always been interested in farmland conservation and ensure there is always space on the farm for wildlife.

In 2005, the opportunity arose to create a wildflower meadow in one of the smaller fields on the farm. Jim was keen to establish a traditionally managed hay meadow as he knew the benefits would be significant. He also knew, however, that creating wildflower grasslands is not easy, especially on nutrient-rich arable soils. Six years on the results are very impressive with wildflowers and insects thriving at the site.

Traditionally managed late-cut hay meadows were a common component of the farmed landscape up until the 1970s when early cut and heavily fertilised grass silage became a popular way of getting increased amounts of animal fodder. The benefits, however, of retaining or creating extensively managed hay meadows are many. They are very diverse habitats rich in native wildflowers such as ox-eye daisy, field scabious and yellow rattle and grass species including crested dogstail and meadow foxtail.

The flowers attract insects such as peacock butterflies, honey-bees and bumblebees. On a warm afternoon in late June, with the flowers in full bloom, the meadow is alive with insects and the sound of thousands of pollinators is incredible.



It is the pollinating insects that give these habitats their agricultural value. Bumblebees, for example, pollinate the majority of our field bean crops. At Edrington Mains over 25 hectares of field beans are grown with and without the pollinating insects, agriculture would suffer.

So how do you go about creating a wildflower meadow? Just follow Jim's example. It is best to choose a field with a light, free-draining

soil, not too nutrient rich. If soils are rich in residual nutrients, a stale seed bed should be created by ploughing, rotovating and spraying off the germinating weed seeds.

Native wildflower and grass seed mixes can be sown into the seed bed in spring or autumn.

In the first year, the grasses and flowers should be cut, perhaps twice, at around 10cm in height, with cuttings removed. Because the flowers are perennials, this will not harm them but will encourage

strong root systems. This could be repeated in the second year.

By year three the meadow should be left to flower and set seed. It can then be cut and baled in autumn and ideally grazed. If no stock are available, the meadow can be lightly cut in early spring to prevent grass domination.

One of the most valuable plant species in the meadow at Edrington Mains is yellow rattle. It is useful at helping wildflowers spread because it is a semi-parasitic species that weakens the growth of grasses by feeding on their roots.

In years to come, as the climate heats up and as human populations increase, there will be an increased pressure on farms to produce more crops. It is important that such meadows are retained, not only for agricultural reasons but for environmental and aesthetic reasons too.

Jim Macfarlane says: "The meadow is one of the most interesting parts of the farm, one which I enjoy watching develop and change over the year. I get a real sense of satisfaction from it."

More information on how to manage wildflower grasslands can be obtained from SAC Conservation Services at Greycrook, St Boswells on 01835 823322. **■ Derek Robeson is wildlife conservation advisor for the Scottish Agricultural College at St. Boswells**

Jim Macfarlane monitors progress of the hay meadow he recently created at Edrington Mains.

PHOTOGRAPH: DEREK ROBESON