

Special feature: increasing biodiversity – you may have more than you realise!

Samantha Ranscombe, East Lothian Council Ranger Service, John Stevens, East Lothian Council Groundcare, and Stan da Prato, North Berwick in Bloom and Beautiful Scotland judge share their expertise:

Encouraging wildflowers has become an aim for many Beautiful Scotland and Its Your Neighbourhood groups which now set areas aside for native species. Often they presume this must mean planting or sowing.

This North Berwick example of a 1.7ha wildflower meadow, known locally as the Coos Green because in the past livestock were grazed there, has had neither. We simply encouraged what was there naturally but had been previously been inhibited by regular grass cutting to provide public recreational open space. It is on a raised beach just inland from the present high tide mark, so the soil is very sandy and free draining. This has a big effect on what plants grow there. Simply by reducing mowing, to one cut in the autumn, an interesting variety of wild flowers has emerged. We have recorded nearly 30 species of flowering plants: lady's bedstraw, restharrow, thyme and trefoils grow on the drier hummocks; cowslips give early spring colour; the Scottish bluebell – harebell to southerners - is prominent later in the summer; and in a damper patch we have an expanding colony of native orchids among the abundant buttercups. In June 2017, 653 spikes of northern marsh and 95 common spotted orchids were recorded. Orchids are notoriously promiscuous, so we are now finding some hybrids. In hollows, bigger plants like knapweed and ragwort thrive. This last is somewhat controversial as it is poisonous to livestock but, as no grazing now occurs, we allow it as a native species and food plant for the distinctively striped cinnabar moth caterpillars.

To allow the public easy access, and to avoid accusations that this is just the council saving money, paths are cut through the sward which allows people to walk their dogs without getting wet feet.



The East Lothian coast can have little more than 20 inches of rain per annum. That means that in some years we can cut but do not need to lift as there has been so little growth. However, a damp summer in 2016 led to an increase in coarse grasses and fewer flowers. Last autumn, after the cut, North Berwick in Bloom and ranger led volunteer groups spent several mornings raking off the material. As an experiment, we asked the mower operator to scalp parts of one

section and we sowed yellow rattle into the bare patches. This has germinated successfully and was in flower by June. Yellow rattle is well known as a hemi-parasite on grasses, so it will be interesting to see if it reduces their vigour in the trial area. The many hours spent laboriously raking has paid off, with excellent flowering this spring and summer.

Note, if we were to repeat the operation even 50 metres further inland, we would have a different wildflower meadow due to heavier soil which would support a different plant community.



All photos kindly provided by Rosie Oberlander, North Berwick in Bloom.