



A network of mown paths through a longer sward (left) is an effective way to design with long grass.

Garden solutions

Let your lawn go wild

If you are looking for a way to reduce time spent on lawn maintenance, letting some of it grow longer can be a beautiful and ecologically sound solution

Author: **Melissa Mabbitt**, writer for *The Garden*, talks to Matthew Brewer, Horticulturist at RHS Garden Harlow Carr, North Yorkshire
Photography: **Tim Sandall**

Mowing is one of the most time-consuming tasks in the garden. Even in gardens with the most generous borders, lawns usually take up a large proportion of space, and the traditional maintenance advice is to mow once or twice a week.

Most gardeners, however, are becoming conscious of the environmental impact that gardening can have; using a powered mower uses fossil fuels, so reducing the number of times we mow in summer has a positive impact. The production and use of weedkillers and fertilisers for lawns also have impacts many gardeners are keen to reduce.

But the effects of having a less-manicured lawn, if we are willing to accept them, can be positive. >>

Longer grass not treated with weedkillers or fertilisers increases biodiversity by allowing more plant species to move in, creating a habitat for small creatures and producing flowers to support pollinating insects.

Long grass can also make an appropriate place to grow and naturalise bulbs such as *Crocus* or *Narcissus* which may not be suited to beds and borders, while you can also experiment with other later-flowering perennials plants such as *Camassia* in long grass. Pushing a mower can be exhausting, too, especially on a slope – mowing less frequently means more time for tasks you enjoy.

Letting the grass grow longer

At RHS Garden Harlow Carr in North Yorkshire, the team is experimenting with lawns that need less mowing and little or no feeding, as part of a trial by Bristol and Newcastle Universities looking at pollinator-friendly floral lawns.

Matthew Brewer, Horticulturist at Harlow Carr, helps to teach the education courses on developing flowering meadows. He says, 'The experiment aims to establish how mowing frequency produces different results. My view is, if you wish to have a more unusual, diverse mix of wildflowers in your lawn, then it would be better to cut at longer intervals – even as infrequently as annually – to reduce competitiveness of grass and allowing any wildflowers to fully complete their life cycles and set seed.'

What regimes can help you to maintain a wilder lawn?

- ❖ Mow in autumn and winter but stop in December to allow early flowers and bulbs such as cowslips, primroses, crocus and narcissus to bloom in spring.
- ❖ Mow every couple of weeks but take an eight-week break over June and July to allow later-flowering perennials to flower and set seed.
- ❖ Or, to support pollinators throughout the growing season mow every three weeks on a high setting to allow longer flowering periods for small meadow perennials.

Even reducing the frequency of mowing a little can help the environment and reduce maintenance. A study published in *Biological Conservation* (May 2018) found that lawns mown every three weeks contained two and a half times more flowers than lawns mown at shorter intervals. The extra blooms are a boon to pollinating insects. This can be applied to your whole lawn, or you could mow one area more intensively, leaving another to grow longer: this could reduce effort and expenditure by up to half.

Allowing grass to grow long can certainly provide an attractive feel to your garden, and opens up new opportunities for growing plants, while at the same time welcoming in creatures with which we share our gardens. It may also help just a little in reducing any negative impact gardening has on the environment. ○



ADRIAN THOMAS

Experiment with areas of longer grass

One approach is to mow most of your lawn as normal but leave small areas untouched, such as a circle beneath a tree or a dedicated meadow 'patch' within a larger lawn. Tree circles are beneficial; by reducing the need to mow right up to the tree trunk you avoid accidental damage, and the longer grass will reduce foot traffic near the tree, reducing stress to the roots.

At the other extreme, you could let most of the lawn grow long with a few grass paths mown through. If you have a long, rectangular lawn, consider dividing it in halves to create distinct sections – a short-mown traditional lawn adjoining a longer-growing area. A path cut through the long grass to another short-mown section at the rear will create 'rooms' within your lawn. You can vary the area that is mown each year to relieve traffic in successional areas, so reducing soil compaction.



Learn to enjoy different lawn plants

Leaving more time between mowings supports the development of a species-rich lawn. As Matthew Brewer says, 'Unless you have a highly fed, immaculate bowling green, there will probably be wildflowers in your lawn, perhaps a patch of daisies, selfheal, buttercup or clover under a tree where the grass is thin due to shade. If you see a nice group of these growing well, stop mowing this area, allowing this patch of mini-meadow to establish by itself. Certain wildflowers, such as buttercup, daisy and bird's foot trefoil have a plasticity that enables them to adapt with changing mowing intervals.'

These species will be able to compete with the grass even if cut both long or short, frequently or infrequently. Shorter-flowering species that live happily within a mid-length lawn that is mown every three weeks include clover, wood violets, and bugle (above, *Ajuga reptans*). Soil type, light and climate determine which plants will flourish.



Establish more flowering plants

Long grass and existing wildflowers may provide enough interest, but some gardeners add wild flowers including cowslips (below right) or primroses – or even tough perennials that can cope with growing in rough grass, such as *Persicaria* (above) or perennial *Helianthus*. Plant young plants in spring, although cowslips and primroses may arise simply by scattering seed. Bulbs such as snowdrops, crocuses and daffodils are easily added; do not mow until bulb foliage withers.

If you are serious about creating a haven for wildflowers, consider introducing yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), again either as plug plants or seed. This wildflower parasitises and suppresses grasses, allowing a range of other plants to thrive.



'If you're creating an area of longer, less managed grass, always remember to mow paths and mowing strips around the edge. It frames the meadow and makes it look deliberate.'

Matthew Brewer, Horticulturist, RHS Garden Harlow Carr

Matthew's do's and don'ts

Do

Weed out unwanted plants in rough grass in spring. Catching weeds early is key.

Mow at summer's end to neaten grass for winter and allow for spring bulbs, but leave some long grass for hibernating creatures.

Introduce new species by planting wildflower plug plants into your lawn.

Include spring bulbs. This more naturalistic style of lawn management is the perfect opportunity to naturalise bulbs in your sward.

Don't

Use a string trimmer to cut long grass. It cuts it into small pieces that break down quickly into the soil, increasing fertility. Use hand shears, or a rotary mower on a high setting. For large areas of long lawn, use a scythe, grass hook or powered scythe mower.

Use fertilisers, as increasing fertility will encourage more grass and fewer wildflowers.

Apply systemic weedkillers over the grass; these kill wildflowers. Remove unwanted weeds by hand, or spot-treat especially pernicious ones.

Leave grass clippings on the sward, as they increase fertility and can smother wildflower seedlings.

Resources

For more information on techniques and practical advice, search 'Meadow' at rhs.org.uk/advice