



## CONSERVATION HEADLANDS AND WILDFLOWER FIELD MARGINS

One way to improve the nature conservation value of an arable farm without serious impact on profitability is to establish conservation headlands. These are strips around selected edges of fields in which the agro-ecological conditions are managed to encourage the establishment of a non-aggressive, diverse flora which provides a habitat and food source for desirable fauna. Environmental Stewardship funding may be available in certain conditions to offset establishment costs.

### THE BENEFITS OF CONSERVATION HEADLANDS

- They limit invasion of the field from the boundary by aggressive weeds such as cleavers and sterile brome.
- Wild flowers provide a nectar source for hoverflies which can suppress invasion of the crop by aphids.
- The plants and their leaf litter provide cover for beetles and other predatory invertebrates, which help control insect pests.
- Insects encouraged by the floristic diversity provide an essential protein source for both wild birds and game-bird chicks.
- The diverse ground cover can provide nest sites for ground nesting birds such as skylarks and, particularly if backed by a hedge, sunning sites for game birds.
- The floristic diversity provides food for a wide variety of butterflies, bees, hoverflies and birds.
- The flowers are pleasant to look at and foster an image of environmentally conscious agriculture.
- The short grass with attractive wild flowers can be used to encourage walkers to use footpaths where these have been diverted around the headlands.

Establishment is straightforward. A seed mixture suitable to the soil and situation is selected and sown into a prepared seedbed either in September or early spring. September sowings should be favoured on dry soils, spring sowings are more successful on sites where chickweed (*Stellaria media*) and cleavers (*Galium aparine*) are present because these weeds germinate overwinter and can be sprayed off before a spring sowing.

Management requirements are not onerous. They vary according to the individual farmer's objectives and local conditions, and the requirements of any agri-environment scheme in which he takes part. In general, care is necessary to avoid spray drift onto the conservation headland from normal operations carried out on the rest of the field. In the initial stages it may be necessary to apply a well timed mowing or selective herbicide to control aggressive weeds to enable the desirable species to become established.

After the initial investment in establishment, the conservation headland should require no expensive management input. Topping (working from the centre of the field towards the boundary so that young birds are encouraged to retreat to the field boundary) in late winter and late summer is often all that is required. A conservation headland should provide a good long term investment in farmer satisfaction and public relations as well as being of genuine conservation benefit.

## SEED MIXTURES

A typical environmental stewardship seed mixture contains 10-20% wildflowers and 80-90% grass seed. Ideally the wildflowers should be of local-origin to ensure that they are compatible with the local ecology. (see the discussion at [www.herbiseed.com/wildflowers](http://www.herbiseed.com/wildflowers)). The same applies to the grass component of the mixture. Ideally it should be of local-origin wild grasses such as Herbiseed's 'Park Meadow Mixture' both to present minimal threat to local habitats and because it is less competitive than agricultural grass varieties, which can suppress the slower growing wild flowers.

To view a range of Environmental Stewardship mixtures for birds, pollinating insects or other wildlife go to [www.herbiseed.com/wildlife](http://www.herbiseed.com/wildlife) mixtures

Seed and further advice on mixtures and establishment can be obtained from:

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