

Creating Habitats and Protecting Resources



ELS and HLS stewardship agreements cover 2.5 million hectares and there are around 14,000 English farmers with ELS agreements. DEFRA has provided some £400 million to fund these initiatives, with many more in Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish agreements. And the new Countryside Stewardships which aim to replace environmental stewardship (ELS & HLS), the English Woodland Grant Scheme and the Catchment Sensitive Farming Programme (CSF), focus even greater importance on wildlife crops as part of the modern farming business. The emphasis is on quality delivery of the right habitats and farmers who deliver the best value for money in terms of wildlife are likely to be favoured.

Farm Wildlife

Research shows that these seed mixtures deliver habitats rich in pollen and nectar that bees and insects need.

Flowers for Bees

When it comes to providing bumblebees with pollen and nectar it is best to grow a wide range of flowering species. An increase in the number of plant species attracts more and a greater number of species of bumblebees.

Should I Sow Legumes or Wild Flowers?

Both types of seed mix have a role to play. The legume mix, based on clover, is quick to establish and flower, can be rotated with wild bird seed mixes but only lasts for around three years. The wild flower mixes are permanent and are better value for money in the long run. Ideally some of each should be sown as this will increase diversity and offer a longer flowering period supporting greater numbers of bees and other invertebrates.

Sowing Time

These seeds can be sown spring or autumn. Wait for the soil to warm in March and avoid late autumn sowings after the end of September. All these seeds are small and must be surface sown (10 mm max.) and rolled before and after sowing.

Farmland Birds - Producing winter food for the hungry gap
Birds starve to death in the winter. Our seed mixtures provide food for both small and large seed eating birds. Seeds produced by different species decline at varying rates throughout the winter.

The Right Options for Winter Bird Food

It can be concluded from our experience over the last 10 years that there are two distinct types of bird seed mixtures. One is the annual mix which provides seed in the first winter and is quick to establish from a May sowing. The second is our two year mixture which contains annuals and biennials to provide seed over two winters. This is based on kale and has the great advantage of only needing planting every two years. These mixtures provide insects for chicks in the summer, but their main purpose is to provide winter seed for farmland birds. We can mix to order so that any mixture can be catered for.

Managing & Positioning Wild Bird Seed Mixes

Seed bearing crops for wild birds need management just like any other farm crop. Good crop establishment is essential. Seedbed preparation starts early to flush weeds with the aim of a final seedbed being created in early May. Seed should be sown at around 2cm in warm soil and finally rolled in. The right mix in the right place can deliver really excellent results. Areas next to woodland or hedges offer shelter but some mid field sites are necessary for birds that avoid the woodland or hedge edge. The need for two different mixtures to extend the feeding period is now becoming clear.

One Year Bird Seed Option

Summary: From a seed mixture sown in April or May, this option provides a single, one off seed crop in the first winter. It is then ploughed in. The mixture may be grown on the same ground for more than one year provided that the yield of seed remains good and that weeds do not take over.

Advantages: The initial seed is cheap, reliable and effective. The broadleaved annual species flower and will provide a habitat for insects which in turn provide food for chicks.

Disadvantages: There is the implicit need to re establish this every year. This option is therefore not suitable for those on land where spring seedbeds cannot be reliably obtained.

Two Year Bird Seed Option

Summary: This lasts for two years and comes in two parts. Cereal and quinoa for the first winter, kale and fodder beet for the second. The results from this option can be exceptionally good but it is vital to get a clean entry without weeds.

Advantages: Lasts twice as long and so demands less overall cultivation and management time. To many this will be a low cost option in the long run. Fodder beet does not suffer from flea beetle and holds seed longer than kale.

Disadvantages: The seed for this option is initially more expensive. Aggressive weeds can become established as they are allowed to grow uninterrupted for two years. Fodder beet is not suitable for farms that grow sugar beet.

Rotations

Annual sowings of bird seeds mixtures that are left in the same place will result in falling seed yields. One solution, according to Marek Nowakowski, is to swap bird seed areas with pollen and

nectar clover areas after no more than 3 years. This would be a sustainable rotation and fit well with ELS/OELS/HLS regulations.

Management of Weeds in Sown Mixtures

Any land that is to support a wild bird seed mix will need to be managed carefully to control weeds. This is especially the case on those awkward areas of fields that may already have weed problems. These seed mixtures will not tolerate mowing which is often used to control annual weeds during early establishment of pollen and nectar areas. Therefore the use of the stale seedbed technique prior to sowing is recommended.

Resource Protection -

Grassy areas to shield natural resources and provide wildlife habitats

Although a good deal of attention is given to producing pollen, nectar and wild bird seed, there are a wealth of other options to choose from in ELS and HLS. For example, Buffer Strips, which protect our natural resources, already cover 30,000 hectares with nearly half this area again comprising awkward nooks and crannies being managed under the Field Corner Management option. Information is provided here on using and managing seed mixtures to deliver successful results to the modern farm business managing land under agri-environmental agreements.

Stop at the Buffers

Grass strips on the edge of many fields have become a key distinguishing feature of our arable landscape. They are used most notably to protect water courses, hedges and ditches as well as to provide habitats for invertebrates and mammals. Grass strips first started to become popular around 20 years ago with field experiments which took place on farm. The Beetle Bank grass mixture, pioneered by The Game Conservancy (as was), became successful as it provided insects for chicks and habitats for small mammals in large arable fields. Today, the main use of a buffering grass strip is to protect water courses against nitrate that could otherwise effect water and aquatic life. Whether this issue is adequately addressed by the use of buffer strips will only be realised in the fullness of time, but resource protection is now firmly embedded in farming businesses.

Unproductive Field Corners

Environmental schemes provide the ideal opportunity to take out awkward corners which large machinery cannot easily access and which therefore have low productivity. One of the most obvious practical advantages of this option is the squaring of irregularly shaped fields. This means less overlap and wastage of inputs and easier work for tractor drivers. This is a good option which attracts wildlife and achieves valuable wildlife benefits and points towards ELS/OELS/HLS.

Initially, during the first year, these areas will require mowing to control annual weeds. However, once established, they are low

maintenance needing a cut once in every five years.

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