

Arable Field Margins



Arable field margins are strips of low intensity grassland on the edges of arable fields which provide valuable habitat for a range of plant and animal species.

Under Environmental Stewardship, payments may be available to eligible landowners for the creation of arable field margins. Different widths of margin can be chosen depending on field shape, farm machinery and purpose.

While provision of arable field margins can offer both ecological and financial benefits, appropriate management techniques are vital to maximise gains from this habitat.

Provision of Arable Field Margins

Creation of Margins

- Although margins can take different forms, there are two principle types that can be established: rough grass margins for birds, mammals and over-wintering insects, and wild flower margins for pollinating insects
- Margins can be created by natural regeneration or seeding. Natural regeneration is usually better for wildlife but it depends on the plant species present
- Autumn is the best time for establishment; an increased seed rate will be required if sowing in spring
- Native grass species are better for wildlife than rye-grass. Different species mixes can be used to create different sub-habitats

Nectar and Pollen Rich Plant Species

- There are specific options in Environmental Stewardship relating to provision of nectar and pollen rich plant mixtures
- Mixes of fine grasses and at least 3 legumes, such as Red Clover, Alsike Clover and Birds-foot Trefoil, are nectar/pollen rich and weed resistant

Management Techniques

- Weed control is the priority in the first year, with the regime depending on target species and the weeds present
- Frequency of cutting and management techniques in subsequent years will vary depending on species desired in the margin
- Traffic and storage on the margins should be kept to a minimum, as regular use will reduce the wildlife value
- Thistles, docks and ragwort should be spot-treated to prevent establishment and subsequent domination of the margin
- Care should be taken to avoid spray drift or fertiliser spreading onto the margin, as this will reduce plant diversity and encourage weeds
- A management regime that produces a diverse sward height will lead to greatest plant species diversity and subsequent wildlife benefits
- Management of wildflower margins under Environmental Stewardship should be agreed with your Natural England adviser

For further information please contact:

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