



Britain's arable production lands are home to the UK's most threatened group of wild plants. Spreading Hedge-parsley, Corn Chamomile and Small-flowered Catchfly were once widespread across Britain but are now endangered. If these plants are to survive as an integral part of Britain's landscape, it is vital that farmers adopt arable options within Stewardship. If you have a rare species on your land it can also help your farm to qualify for entry into Higher Level Stewardship.

HOW STEWARDSHIP CAN HELP TO SAVE RARE ARABLE PLANTS

The arable options within Environmental Stewardship provide the mechanism to conserve arable flora, but in order for it to work, farmers need to understand the importance of cultivated margins. Arable plants depend on regular soil disturbance for germination. Unfertilised conservation headlands and uncropped cultivated margins/plots are proven to be the Stewardship options that benefit arable plants the most.

Although grass buffer strips are a popular option and provide environmental benefits, they do not meet the needs of any arable plants due to the lack of annual cultivation. It is vital for Britain's farmland biodiversity that arable farmers embrace other arable options under Stewardship.

Arable plants are not only an important source of food and nesting habitat for farmland birds and insects, they also have strong historic and cultural importance, with species like Cornflower and Corn Marigold being perennial favourites.

Arable plants and your farm

Arable plants can be safely and economically managed within the modern cereal crop. But how do you know if your farm is home to important arable flora? And what are the conditions to think about when choosing sites for margins?

- Indicator species:** Corn Spurrey, Fluellen's and Fumitories found in field edges and set-aside can indicate the presence of rarer species. Cultivated margins should be sited where species like these occur.
- Farming history:** fields with a long history of cultivation are more likely to have a richer seed bank – arable species have a remarkable ability to regenerate from dormant, buried seed if given the right conditions.
- Soil type:** most arable plants prefer light, well-drained soil that is relatively low in fertility, although heavy soils can hold particular species of interest, e.g. Corn Buttercup prefers heavy clay.
- Aspect:** sunny, south-facing margins are preferable.
- Weed competition:** avoid fields with serious infestations of Cleavers, Barren Brome and Black-grass – they will be difficult to manage without herbicides.
- To find out** what rare arable plants could be found on your farm and for all the information on managing arable options see www.arableplants.org.uk

To qualify for £30 per ha under Entry Level Stewardship, you need to gain points. Options that benefit arable plants all score highly. For example, the equivalent of 1ha of uncropped cultivated margin would be over 1800 metres of hedgerow management (both sides).

ARABLE OPTIONS UNDER ENTRY LEVEL STEWARDSHIP

1. 6m UNCROPPED, CULTIVATED MARGINS ON ARABLE LAND

(ELS/EF11 400 points/ha) [Non Rotational – option to relocate to another area in the same field if weed burden becomes unmanageable].

Management: this is an ideal environment for arable plants. An unfertilised, 6m cultivated margin is produced with minimal herbicide application, and with no crop sown, this reduces competition.

Benefits to arable plants: different species germinate, flower and set seed at different times of the year, therefore rotation of margins within spring and winter crops is ideal. This rotation also allows the management of aggressive weeds by changing cultivation timing and depth.

2. CONSERVATION HEADLANDS IN CEREAL FIELDS

(ELS/EF9 100 points/ha) with no fertiliser or manure applied (ELS/EF10 330 points/ha) [Rotational]

Management: a 6 to 24m headland is managed on the edge of a cereal crop. Biodiversity is increased due to no insecticide application after 15 March, a restricted herbicide programme and ideally no fertiliser or manure application.

Benefits to arable plants: choose conservation headlands without fertiliser. They gain more points and provide a far better environment for arable plants. The lack of nitrogen results in a less competitive cereal crop and arable plants thrive in the less nutrient rich soil.

The ability of seeds to lay dormant in the seed bank means that suitable management is not required every year in the same place allowing options to rotate around the farm.

3. OVER-WINTERED STUBBLES (ELS/EF6 120 points/ha) [Rotational]

Management: very light cultivation to stubble is permitted, which encourages autumn germination. No herbicides, pesticides, fertilisers or manures can be applied to the stubble and a spring crop must follow.

Benefits to arable plants: over-wintered stubbles provide habitat for uncommon moss and liverwort communities. The stubble will allow some plants to set seed and the spring crop that follows benefits spring germinating species.

Weedy stubble is a very important winter habitat for farmland birds that feed on the split grain and weed seeds. It benefits species such as tree sparrows, corn buntings and yellowhammers.

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HIGHER LEVEL STEWARDSHIP (HLS)

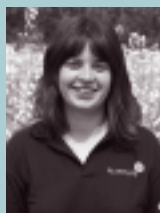
There are a number of options under HLS that can deliver even greater benefit to arable plants. Full details can be found in the HLS Handbook available from RDS and at www.arableplants.org.uk. Key options are as follows:

HF14 Unharvested, fertiliser-free conservation headlands (£440/ha)

HF15 Reduced herbicide cereal crop management preceding over-wintered stubbles and a spring crop (£195/ha)

HF20 Cultivated fallow plots or margins for arable flora (£440/ha)

There are also options for enhancing set-aside with fallow plots (**EH16**) and also providing low input conditions on land following set-aside (**HF18 & HF19**)



Plantlife is the UK's leading charity working to protect wild plants and their habitats. We run a comprehensive programme to conserve arable plants, including the national Arable Plants Survey. Data from the survey has been used to identify the UK's Important Arable Plant Areas, which contributes to the UK Government's biodiversity targets for 2010. We also run training events in partnership with FWAG, and host the arable plants website, which includes technical advice on managing all the arable stewardship options and detailed species information.

For information on any of this work please contact Plantlife's Arable Plants Officer, Kate Still, at
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For further information on conserving arable plants on your farm and for advice on choosing arable options under Stewardship contact the following:



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Rural Development Service

DEFRA Helpline: 08459 335577
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