

Cambridge House Grammar, Northern Ireland

Spend less, do less and get much more!

The Polli:Nation project at Cambridge House achieved incredible biodiversity by doing and spending less. A simple change to their grounds mowing regime enabled the very rare Irish Lady's Tresses orchids to flourish for the first time in decades, adding a sixth site to this plants distribution in the region.

The school was unsure of the best way to go about their grounds development for pollinators. They had a large area of mown grass but very few formal borders and planting areas. The Polli:nation Officer supporting the school could see that the short grass contained many species of wildflower just waiting for the opportunity to come up. With the go ahead from the Principal teacher it was agreed that they would experiment with a "Don't mow let it Grow "exercise



The very rare Irish Lady's tresses and its pollinators.





“We just stopped mowing the grass and that was it and all these flowers came up from no-where. I couldn’t believe it.”

Year 13 student

How have they encouraged pollinators?

The school grounds had been mown and lifted for many years. This had created an area of grassland which was very low in fertility, enabling a huge variety of wildflowers the opportunity to flourish in the absence of competitive grasses. This in turn attracts a greater diversity of pollinators and other invertebrates. Native wildflowers have much larger nectar and pollen reserves than ornamental plants and seed mixes and hence pollinators in the grounds enjoyed an abundance of food and shelter.

Benefits to the school

In the first year the meadow was a stunning show of over 35 grassland plant species. The results were spectacular and cost absolutely nothing, in fact money was saved on fuel and staff hours through the reduced mowing regime

Year 13 students carry out biodiversity surveys.



“We now have a superb spectacle in the school grounds and a great educational resource too.

Principal Teacher

The meadow was used by several departments in the school, but was of particular value to Key stage 3 Science for their ecosystems and habitats work. Science teacher Myrtle Spence said “it has been wonderfully enriching for the children, to have that hands on experience of wildlife and biodiversity and we have benefited from having easy access to a real life ecosystem for our survey work”.

Prior to the development of the meadow the short grassed area was of no benefit to wildlife or to pupils for learning, play or socialising. Two meandering paths cut through the meadow, encourage children to walk through the area and many use the meadow for their lunch breaks. The meadow is located directly next to the rugby pitch and an interpretation sign has been erected to inform the spectators of the purpose of the meadow and the incredible wildlife it hosts.



Visitors to the school enjoying the orchids

Challenges

In the first year miscommunication led to the meadow being mown after just 3 months. This was a slight set back and did impact on spring flowering plants, but there was still time for a summer show. The meadow sits on a bank which is very prominent and easily seen from the road. There were some questions from the local community about the aesthetic or untidiness of unmown grass. This was an opportunity to raise awareness about the meadow and explain the change to mowing regime. The local press was invited to cover the story as a way of educating the public regarding the purpose of the meadow. Communication with ground staff and the community was key.





The story gathered national interest and caused great excitement on twitter

The future

The NI Polli:nation Project Officer shared the story on Twitter and it received national interest, with some orchid enthusiasts visiting from England just to see the Irish Lady's tresses. They provided their expertise regarding future management, surveying and recording and this will be incorporated into a school orchid group who will take on the care of these special plants. They will be tasked with hosting "Orchid Week" when people will be invited to visit the school to see the orchids and hear about grassland management. The BBC and Radio Ulster covered the story and it inspired other schools to try the same, Castle Tower school in the same town have now turned over a significant piece of land to meadow and are learning grassland management techniques. They have been donated a ride on mower and students will be taking on the autumn cut and lift as part of their horticulture qualification.

"I couldn't believe that the orchids have been here all this time, it's lovely to see them, I had no idea what they were, you'd have thought it was just a bit of scruffy grass. "

Groundsman - Harrv



Sean Cole (orchid expert) visits from England

