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FARMING FOR WILDLIFE IN WALES

## Wildlife cover crops (or wild bird cover)



P. Thompson (GCT)

These strips can provide the best seed source for birds on the farm.

*This approach offers an important opportunity to create a crop that will feed seed-eating birds in areas where traditional food sources, such as weedy stubbles, spilt grain and cereals fed to outdoor stock, are no longer available. Wild bird cover can be created on set-aside, or funded under Tir Gofal. Different rules apply to the creation of these 'cover crops' on set-aside and under Tir Gofal, and you should check the latest information or seek advice to ensure that your management meets the relevant requirements.*

### BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

#### Seed-bearing crops provide food for birds throughout the winter

The use of a mix of seed crops will lead to the creation of an attractive feeding habitat for a wide range of seed-eating birds. A two-year crop will also provide seed throughout the spring of the second year and this may help birds to attain breeding condition.

#### Flowering plants attract nectar-feeding insects

Any flowering crops, especially clover or phacelia, will encourage nectar-feeding insects. Many of these insects will then lay eggs in the vicinity and thus increase the numbers of insect larvae available to birds as food. Hoverflies are especially attracted to these strips and will lay eggs wherever there is an abundance of aphids for their larvae to feed on, thus helping to reduce numbers of these pests in adjacent crops.

#### Cereal-based mixes provide good brood-rearing cover for grey partridges

A cereal-based mix established in the spring or autumn will create an open, invertebrate-rich crop that is an ideal foraging environment for grey partridge chicks.

**GUIDELINES OVERLEAF**

# HOW CAN I CREATE AND MANAGE WILDLIFE COVER CROPS (OR WILD BIRD COVER)?

## PREPARATION AND MANAGEMENT

- To comply with set-aside rules, the plots should be at least 0.3 hectares in size and should contain at least two different crop types throughout their life. Several smaller plots are better than one large area in terms of providing food for birds throughout the farm.
- The seedbed should be prepared and the crop drilled as for a commercial arable crop.
- Sowing a cereal mix and broadcasting the other crops before rolling should achieve good establishment.
- Current set-aside rules stipulate that a maximum of 30 kg N (nitrogen) per hectare can be applied.
- As with all crops, wild bird cover is susceptible to competition from weeds, and attack by pests and diseases during establishment. Any use of insecticides and most herbicides on set-aside will require a derogation from the Arable Area Payment Scheme (AAPS).
- You may need to relocate plots if disease levels (eg of brassica club root) prevent establishment.

## A CROP FOR SEED-EATING BIRDS

- Establish a mix in April or May and maintain this for two years. Kale (which seeds in the second year) and a cereal are particularly important components. On set-aside, it is useful to add another biennial plant, such as teasel or parsnip, to ensure that the plot holds two crop types in the second year. Mustard, forage rape, linseed and quinoa can also be included.
- After two years, destroy the cover in late March or early April and re-establish the mix as soon as possible.
- If first-year crops are sown next to second-year crops, there will be seed available in the spring every year.

## A NECTAR CROP FOR INSECTS

- A small component (up to 5% of seed weight) of clover or phalecia will boost the number of nectar-eating insects attracted to the strip.

## A BROOD-REARING COVER FOR GREY PARTRIDGES

- You should aim to create a 20-metre strip alongside a tussocky grass margin where partridges are likely to nest.
- The seed rate should be low to create an open habitat that gives birds access to the ground and low-growing weeds (eg a mix of 25 kg cereal and 2.5 kg mustard or rape per hectare).
- Establish in the spring or autumn each year.
- This can be carried out under the wild bird cover option on set-aside.

## KEY POINTS

- Wild bird cover can be created on set-aside or included in a Tir Gofal application.
- Check the latest set-aside rules or scheme guidelines to ensure that your management meets the relevant requirements.

Many of these guidelines may be funded by Tir Gofal, the agri-environment scheme for Wales. Get further info from:



Advisory Officer, The RSPB, North Wales Office, Maes Y Ffynnon, Penrhosgarnedd, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DW.  
Tel: 01248 363800



The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge, Hampshire SP6 1EF.  
Tel: 01425 652381



Farming Connect, Y Lanfa, Trefechan, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 1AS.  
Tel: 08456 000 813



Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group Cymru, Ffordd Arran, Dolgellau, Gwynedd LL40 1LW.  
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Tel: 01248 385500