

Wildlife Cover Crops

Wildlife cover crops benefit a range of arable wildlife. The management is not aimed specifically at arable flora, but they can provide suitable areas of habitat depending on how it is managed.

The establishment of a diverse arable plant community helps to support a variety of insects which do not harm the crop, and in turn, support predatory insects which help to control crop pests.

Habitat for arable plants ★★☆☆☆

Habitat for farmland birds ★★★★★

Habitat for invertebrates ★★★★★

Habitat for small mammals ★★★★★

Where should wildlife cover crops be located?

Areas of wildlife cover crops can be placed anywhere on the farm to provide benefits for nature. For ease of management and synergy with the farm business, low yielding and awkward to manage areas, such as field corners and margins, are often favoured. These can be on any soil type, including clays, but are best placed where there is not a high problem weed burden or where there are rare arable plants that would benefit from more targeted management for open habitats, such as cultivated margins.

They will deliver maximum benefits if

managed alongside other wildlife habitats, such as hedgerows, beetle banks and cultivated margins.

What benefits will wildlife cover crops deliver?

The aim of a wildlife cover crop is to establish a suite of plants that have high seed loads for farmland birds and small mammals.

The vegetation should have an open structure to allow wildlife passageway through the crop.

Management of wildlife cover crops

Depending on the seed mixes involved, for example kale, best practice management



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requires an application of fertilisers to boost yield. This can have an adverse impact on rare arable plants, but could be balanced out by not applying herbicides.

Generally, wildlife cover crops are sown relatively early in the spring, before mid-May, and can be a combination of cereal with other seed-rich plants such as quinoa and sometimes plants for pollinators, such as phacelia.

Wildlife cover crops without a cereal component are sometimes used as part of the rotation to enable problem grass weeds to be cleaned-up using targeted herbicide. Reducing and stopping the use of broad-spectrum herbicides can hugely enhance the arable plant community. Wildlife cover crops can be managed on an annual or biannual basis. Kale requires two years to produce seed, and this reduction in the number of cultivations is not

ideal for the majority of arable plants which are annuals. Cover crops can also be rotated around the farm to allow for management to prevent the build-up of problem species.



Wildlife cover crop © Kevin Rylands



Bird cover crop © Nick Tomalin