

# Road verges are Britain's secret gardens where the wild flowers bloom

CLIVE ASLET

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Local councils cut road verges twice as often as they need to - halting the proliferation of much-loved wildflowers CREDIT: TREVOR DINES/PLANTLIFE /PA

## **A pocket of joyous biodiversity survives on our roadsides**

One of the greatest environmental tragedies to have befallen Britain is the loss of wildflower meadows – down to 3 per cent of their number at the end of the Second World War. This isn't the stuff of protest by Extinction Rebellion. But the toll is dismal, and more directly relevant to most of us than the Amazonian rainforest, which is somewhat further away. (Though before anybody pursues me on social media, that's important too.)

Fortunately, a pocket of biodiversity survives. Well, less a pocket than a very long, stretched-out stocking – over 300,000 miles of it. Britain’s network of road verges.

What joy. Road verges provide every form of soil type, from dry chalk to acidic bog. Primroses, bluebells and campions sport beside lush, shady Devon lanes, ferns and foxgloves along the dripping byways of Wales. Cow parsley may be everywhere, but verges also contain rarer plants – half of all Britain’s flora is represented. Alas, not all local authorities appreciate this glorious resource at its true worth.

They may be slow in fixing potholes, but when it comes to road verges, they’re overzealous. They cut them twice as often as they need to. This stops the proliferation of the wildflowers that everybody loves, while causing unnecessary expense. Now the wildflower charity Plantlife, of which I am a trustee, has got together with Butterfly Conservation and other partners to set a code of conduct; two cuts a year (one before the wildflowers have got going, the other after they’ve set their seed) are better than the four often imposed. Less is truly more.



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This may seem counter-intuitive. I remember my father, a keen gardener, mowing his lawn to velvet pile, and beautiful it seemed at the time. But a highly manicured lawn contains little biodiversity. It’s the same with fields

that have been “enriched” (impoverished would seem a better word) with fertiliser. They gleam with an intensity of emerald, akin to one of David Hockney’s iPad paintings; but sport a miserable selection of wildflowers, which generally grow on poorer soils.

Fortunately, gardeners aren’t quite so obsessed with tidiness as they used to be. Last month, I visited the inspiring Nant y Bedd garden in the Brecon Beacons, shortlisted by the National Gardens Scheme in a competition to find the nation’s favourite garden. It would have horrified gardeners of a previous generation: nature was on the point of taking over. Today’s visitors think the wildness is dynamic, poetic – and aswarm with bees and dragonflies.

Greta Thunberg might not like road verges; she hates cars. And with some reason, since the nitrogen from their exhausts has the same effect as fertiliser: it encourages thuggish plants like docks and nettles to grow profusely, shading out shyer, less vigorous flowers. Answer: remove the mown grass after cutting. Then a thousand flowers can bloom.

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