Climate School 180

Thinking about grass

Introduction

It is likely that the way grass has been managed in your school grounds has stayed the same for years. If you are a larger school, you will probably have a contract with an external contractor to undertake the work. If you are a small school, you might have one person who maintains your site.

Whichever system you use there are some changes you can make to ensure the grassland across your site is helping you achieve your climate goals because, as well as improving the biodiversity of your site, having a species-rich grassland will help you to maintain a healthy soil which is key to capturing the greatest amount of carbon. Long grass can also help to cool down your site especially in urban areas.

Sports fields/pitches

Your school field is usually the largest grass area of your grounds and there may be specific requirements of the grass for your pitches depending on the sports you play and at what level – cricket and rugby requirements are very different, for example.

There are many different species of grass and sports pitches are made up of specific mixes of some of these species. This makes them more hard wearing or ensures that they provide a smoother surface for play. However, the chances are much of the rest of your site will be made up of a similar species mix and managed in a similar way when this might not be necessary.

Your sports fields are also likely to get heavy use, often leading to compacted soils which can make them prone to flooding. To prevent this, pitches can be spiked to help with aeration and to reduce the compaction. Many schools have pitches that flood so it is important to check whether this work is being carried out regularly.

There could be other factors that increase flooding too such as poorly laid pitches, something being badly buried under the pitch (sometimes even an old school building), or you might have a sloping site or just have a very heavy soil.

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Take a look at the grass areas outside of the pitch area. You will need some run-off space around the pitches (where pupils run off the edge of the pitch when playing), or you might need spaces to practice such as practice squares. Also, you need to look at the area used both over the summer months and the winter and spring as different sports will take up a different area.

Other areas of grass

In some schools there may also be significant areas of grass outside the sports area including lawns at the front of the school building, little areas of grass left between buildings when new parts of the school were built, walkways, space around growing areas and flower beds, inside courtyards, amphitheatres and mounds, at the edges of woods and hedges, and in wildlife areas.

Grass that has fertilizer applied to it and is managed, such as being regularly mown, is known as ‘improved grassland’. For schools most, if not all of their grass, is improved grassland. However, they are not improved for wildlife! In fact, this management will reduce the number of different plant species in the sward (an area covered in grass).



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Generally, if an area is improved by the addition of fertilizer the grass grows strongly and this means it tends to outcompete the wildflowers that might otherwise grow there. This in turn means that there will be fewer wildlife species that live or feed there. Research also tells us that the health of soil is also better where the sward is more diverse, and this means that more carbon is likely to be captured.

So, in the spaces where you don't need a specific grass mix for sport, you can consider how you can make your grass more diverse. Don't forget that some areas will still need grass to be hard-wearing unless you decide to use other surface materials in these places.

Improving the diversity of your grass

Just allowing grass to grow long in areas can provide shelter for a range of animals such as hedgehogs and frogs, food for birds and mammals, and shelter and breading sites for some invertebrates. However, you can also increase its biodiversity in different ways including lowering its fertility to allow more wildflowers to thrive or by including wildflowers in the grass.



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Wildflowers can be incorporated into grass in a range of ways, some tend to be more successful than others. Check out the National Education Nature Park information about how to develop grassland to improve its biodiversity to find the method that is mostly likely to work for your site. Whilst this guidance is written for English Schools it will be useful for many schools in the UK.

Managing your grass

If you never cut your grass again you would eventually end up with a woodland covering your site, due to ecological succession. Succession is the process of change in species and habitats over time. After short grass you would have long grass and herbaceous plants, then brambles and shrubs will come in and finally trees.



This takes many years but we can either speed up succession (e.g. plant trees and shrubs) or stop it at a specific stage, such as mowing it to keep it at the short grass stage. In schools it is common to have the grass mown every couple of weeks to make sure it is short enough to play sports on.



This set of three images shows an area that had clover and therefore many insects thriving in it (the first image shows pupils undertaking a pollinator survey). It was gang mown as that is always what had happened which left an area between buildings of short grass. This therefore had very few insects visiting it. A lack of insects in turn will lead to fewer birds and mammals.



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If you are managing areas for wildlife, you can think about mowing the grass less often over the school year. This sounds like it will cost you less, and this may be the case, but the maintenance staff will still have to come in to cut the sports fields and will have to use different methods for the long grass when that does need cutting back, so this may not work out to be cheaper.

However, thinking around this and working with the maintenance lead, you may find that mowing some areas less frequently could free up some time when grounds staff could undertake other tasks instead. This could be creating bird boxes, attending to compost bins or checking whether newly planted trees need attention. Talk with whoever manages your grounds maintenance staff about this so that you can work out a plan that is going to work for you.

There may also be other tasks that the grounds staff do now that you would like pupils or parents to take charge of, freeing up more capacity in the professionals' time for other things. If this is the case, make sure this information is clearly communicated to whoever does the work on the ground. They need to know what is happening and why.

LtL is developing a maintenance guide to help you manage your grounds in response to climate change and biodiversity loss and this takes you through how to create a simple management plan for your site. Local wildlife or horticulture organisations may also be able to help with this.

Remember to check out more information in the 'how to' guides about developing and managing grassland to increase its biodiversity. You will not only need to think about how you add species to your grassland but also how you manage it for the greatest benefit for wildlife.

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