

Wildflower Enhancement Project at Rock Edge, Oxford City

Judy Webb 2026

Over the last five years, Friends of Lye Valley (FoLV) have worked with Oxford Direct Services (ODS) to enhance the floral diversity at Rock Edge. Rock Edge already had some surviving limestone flowers, but populations were small and much of the site was plain grass-dominated. There were for example, important populations of Field Scabious and Small Scabious surviving, which are becoming increasingly rare in England.

This project was to increase populations of such important wildflowers and vastly increase the resource of nectar and pollen-rich flowers available to insects. Volunteers have collected seed of flowers that enjoy the special dry lime-rich alkaline soil at Rock Edge. To help seedlings survive it was decided to reduce grass dominance first to lower competition.

Plans were made to scrape off areas of enriched grass-dominated turf to expose the low nutrient limestone-rich subsoil favoured by wildflowers. ODS staff have worked onsite with a digger whenever time allowed each year to remove the plain grass topsoil from patches and pile it in an out of the way location. Seed was spread in the bare subsoil scrapes by FoLV volunteers and raked-in.

The scrapes were managed by a once a year cut and collect by council staff in early autumn, along with the rest of the site.

Sometimes germination was patchy due to dry springs (like 2022 and 2025) which meant seedlings did not survive once germinated. However wetter springs have made up for these losses and the scrapes are now full of wildflowers.

Volunteers also grew some plants at home, which were later plug-planted into the scrapes.

The first few scrapes were so successful that recently a bigger scraped area has been completed and sown, with the help of funding from local councillors.

Apart from in the scrapes, volunteers broadcast seed in the grassy areas generally, targeting anywhere there was naturally bare soil. This has had some success and especially Yellow Rattle is now increasing on site using this method. This is a semi-parasite plant that reduces grass dominance and therefore increases plant diversity. It is also popular with bees.

Here below are photographs of scrapes, seeding and some of the results. The greater flower resource has meant more nectar and pollen for a whole range of insects, most noticeable bees and butterflies. It is not all about nectar and pollen for adult insects, because Bird's Foot Trefoil is the food plant for caterpillars of the Common Blue Butterfly; and we have indeed seen an increase in sightings of this species at Rock Edge since sowing the scrapes. Wild Marjoram is a particularly important nectar source flower for butterfly adults.

A list of all the species that were introduced to the scrapes follows the photographs. Not all of them survived; the ones that liked the soil conditions best have done exceptionally well.

In some cases the seeding was to bulk up the population of plants that were present but rare. In other cases seeding was to restore species that were lost from the limestone area, as described in historic botanical records (Candytuft, Horseshoe Vetch). Bigger populations of flowers are needed to support the uncommon to rare insects already known from the site such as the Large Scabious Bee *Andrena hattorfiana* and the Scabious Longhorn Moth *Nemophora metallica* which both need to feed specifically on flowers of Field Scabious and Small Scabious.

Poppies were introduced at the seeding stage to provide a quick response of visible flower within one year but were not expected to persist as they need regular soil disturbance. Most wildflowers would need more than a year to get established enough to flower, cowslips for example.





ODS staff creating the first scrapes by turf stripping on the side nearest Old Road. This exposes the lower nutrient subsoil and creates a good seed bed with no grass.



The big scrape stripped in October 2024



Volunteer seeding the latest scrape with Marjoram seed, February 2026.



Wild Marjoram (lilac-pink flowers) and St John's Wort (yellow flowers)



Oxeye Daisies (white flowers) Kidney Vetch (yellow flowers) Knapweeds (purple flowers)



A sea of Kidney Vetch with one Red Clover flower in the centre

List of limestone-loving plants introduced to the scrapes by seed and plug plants

Horseshoe Vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*

Oxeye Daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare*

Cowslip *Primula veris*

Common Knapweed *Centaurea nigra*

Greater Knapweed *Centaurea scabiosa*

Red Clover *Trifolium pratense*

Common Restharrow *Ononis repens*

Bird's Foot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*

Field Scabious *Knautia arvensis*

Mignonette *Reseda lutea*

Wild Carrot *Daucus carota*

Wild Marjoram *Origanum vulgare*

Candytuft *Iberis amara*

Kidney Vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*

Small Scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*

Wild Clary *Salvia verbenaca*

Poppies *Papaver* sp

Yellow Rattle *Rhinanthus minor*

All photographs by Judy Webb

See more about Friends of Lye Valley on the group's website:

<http://www.friendsoflyevalley.org.uk/> here you can always see weekly news of the work of the volunteer group and more wildlife news in our linked social media sites:

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/friendsoflyevalley/>

Blue Sky: @friendlyevalley.bsky.social .