Havens for Nature

Supporting Biodiversity in Faith Grounds

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

This guide was commissioned by the Heritage Council, written by Áine Ní Fhlatharta, and edited by Juanita Browne, in collaboration with the Heritage Council Biodiversity and Conservation teams and Local Authority Biodiversity and Heritage Officers. We are grateful to Jane Mellett, Church Outreach Manager at Trócaire and member of the Laudato Si' Working Group, for her input and guidance.

The content of this guide builds on a range of existing resources relating to biodiversity, including the work of the Heritage Council, the National Biodiversity Data Centre, An Taisce, BirdWatch Ireland, and Clare County Council. We are grateful for their permission to use and share their material, and encourage readers to seek out further information from these organisations. Details of useful resources are included on page 58.

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Foreword

> The Heritage Council works to support communities across Ireland in caring for natural, built and cultural heritage. This guide is part of that mission. It offers practical advice for faith communities on how the grounds they manage can contribute to conservation of biodiversity.

Faith grounds take many forms: places of worship, historic and modern graveyards, meeting houses, mosques, synagogues, temples, parish centres, retreat houses and their surrounding spaces. All of these can provide opportunities for nature. Some already contain remnants of semi-natural habitats, such as traditional meadows, which have become rare in the wider landscape. Others, with thoughtful management, can be adapted to support birds, mammals, and a wide variety of plants, pollinators and other insects.

The Heritage Council's remit spans every aspect of heritage. For that reason, throughout this guide we emphasise that actions for biodiversity must be taken with care, ensuring that they do not cause damage to archaeology, historic fabric or architectural features. Graveyards, in particular, bring these strands together. They hold natural, built and cultural heritage in one place, often side by side, and they remind us that the best outcomes come from considering them together rather than in isolation.

This publication has been developed with the active involvement of Local Authority Biodiversity Officers, whose expertise and partnership with communities is central to its approach. Their work demonstrates how local knowledge and practical guidance can help biodiversity to thrive in everyday places.

We have also been encouraged by the Catholic Church's Return to Nature project, as well as initiatives in other faiths, which have shown how faith communities can lead by example in opening up their grounds to wildlife while maintaining respect for the people and traditions those places serve.

By bringing these lessons together, this guide shows how even small, well-informed actions can make a meaningful difference for biodiversity and for the communities who care for these special places.

Martina Moloney

Chair
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Why biodiversity matters for people of faith – reflections from the Catholic tradition

> Pope Francis, in his 2015 landmark encyclical Laudato Si' – On Care for our Common Home (LS), called for a renewed commitment to the care of creation, reminding "every person living on this planet" (LS, 3) that nature is not a resource to be exploited, but a gift to be cherished and protected. Laudato Si' invites people of all faiths to come together to take action at this time of climate and biodiversity crises. We are invited to make an ecological conversion, as individuals and as communities.

In response to this call, the Irish Bishops' Conference invited all Catholic parishes across the island of Ireland to consider returning 30% of church grounds to nature by 2030: "Parishes are asked to expand their circles of solidarity, to protect and care for biodiversity and creation on 30% of their grounds, and to care for this as a haven for pollinators and biodiversity, that can be enjoyed by the whole community." (Irish Bishops' Conference Spring Statement 2023). Biodiversity, the variety of life on Earth, is a profound expression of God's creativity and generosity. For people of faith, caring for creation is not merely an environmental issue, it is a spiritual, moral, and ethical obligation.

The call to restore our common home is a shared concern for all humanity. Pope Francis writes, "Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another" (LS, 42). This interconnectedness reflects the belief that all of creation is part of a sacred web of life and the diversity of species has an "intrinsic value independent of their usefulness. Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself" (LS,140). When species go extinct due to human actions it reflects a failure to recognise and respect the divine spark present in creation. We are called to care for the earth and its creatures, "to till and to keep the garden of the Lord" (Genesis 2:15). In light of this, the rapid decline of biodiversity and the extinction of species must be addressed with urgency, and faith communities have a huge role to play.

Preserving biodiversity helps protect ecosystems, livelihoods, cultures, and helps us to protect our world for future generations. Biodiversity is a testament to divine creativity, a source of wonder and inspiration, and a crucial component of Earth's health and resilience. For people of faith, protecting biodiversity is not optional, it is a sacred duty. As Laudato Si' so beautifully affirms, "The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely... The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God" (LS, 233). We welcome this document, which will help faith communities across the country to live out this call, to care more deeply for our common home. May these actions be signs of hope, healing, and reverence for the sacred gift of biodiversity, "for we know that things can change" (LS, 13). These principles are shared by many traditions that see care for creation as both a spiritual and moral act. This is shown in the various reflections from those traditions, included throughout this book.

Bishop Martin Hayes

Bishop of Kilmore Diocese and a member of the Laudato Si' Working Group. He has responsibility for promoting Laudato Si' across the Irish Catholic Church.

Jane Mellett

Trócaire Church Outreach Manager and Member of the Laudato Si Working Group, which supports the Return to Nature project on behalf of the Irish Bishops' Conference

The importance of biodiversity

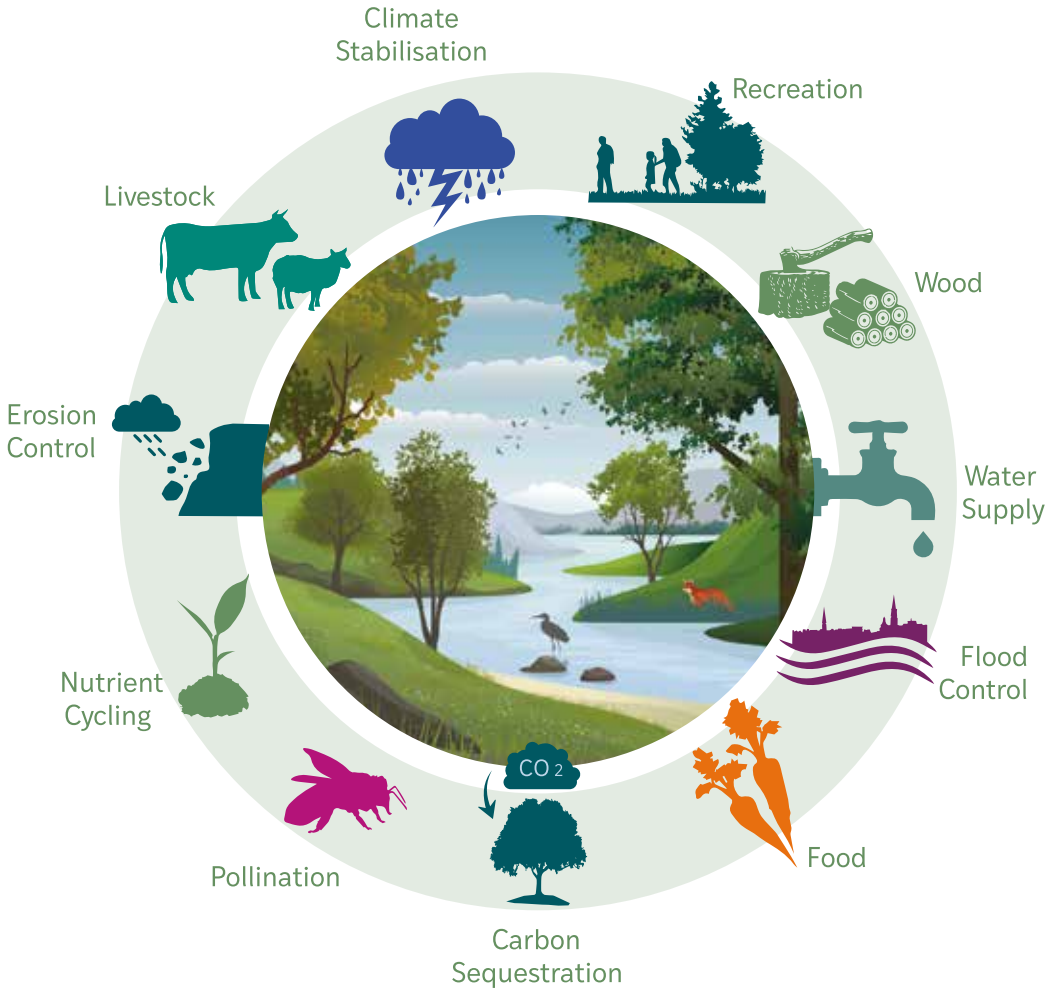
> Biodiversity is the variety of all living things on Earth – from plants, birds and mammals, to insects, microbes and fungi – as well as their genetic diversity, and the ecosystems, habitats and landscapes on which they depend.

Biodiversity is essential for the wellbeing of the Earth's ecosystems and to the survival of all living things, including humans. Different species have unique roles within an ecosystem: some plants help prevent soil erosion, while predators maintain the balance in animal populations. When one species disappears, it can disrupt the entire ecosystem, leading to a domino effect.

Many of our essential resources, such as clean air, food, medicine, and clean water, depend on our diverse natural environments. Biodiversity also contributes to physical and mental health, and has cultural and recreational value, shaping our traditions, art, and spirituality.

Ecosystem Services

How Biodiversity is helping us



Ireland's biodiversity

Ireland is home to tens of thousands of different types of animals, plants, and other living things. These live in many different kinds of places, called habitats, where they find food, water, and shelter. In Ireland, important habitats include woodlands, oceans, bogs, lakes, rivers, hedgerows, and grasslands. Many of these habitats are very special because they are rare in Europe or contain unique wildlife.

Even small spaces can be important for nature. A single tree, a pond, a pile of leaves, or an old stone wall can provide homes for insects, birds, and other creatures.

When habitats are healthy, they give wildlife everything they need to survive. But when habitats are damaged or lost, many species struggle to live.

In Ireland, scientists have found that many plants and animals are in decline. More than half of our native plants are decreasing; about one-third of our wild bees are close to extinction; and more than one-fifth of our breeding birds are in decline.

All is not lost however and, across the country, community groups, individuals and public bodies are taking positive action to look after wildlife. Whether it's focusing on a window box, a garden, a farm or a whole town, there is so much that each of us can do to help Ireland's biodiversity to recover.

> *"In the mind of the bodhisattva, there is no distinction between self and other, and so he or she seeks the welfare of all sentient beings equally."*
>
> – Avatamsaka Sutra (Flower Garland Sutra)


#BiodiversityLouth


DUBLIN
MOSQUE

Faith grounds and biodiversity

Faith grounds all across Ireland hold remarkable potential for biodiversity. They include places of worship, burial grounds, gardens, and open spaces that are often at the heart of their communities.

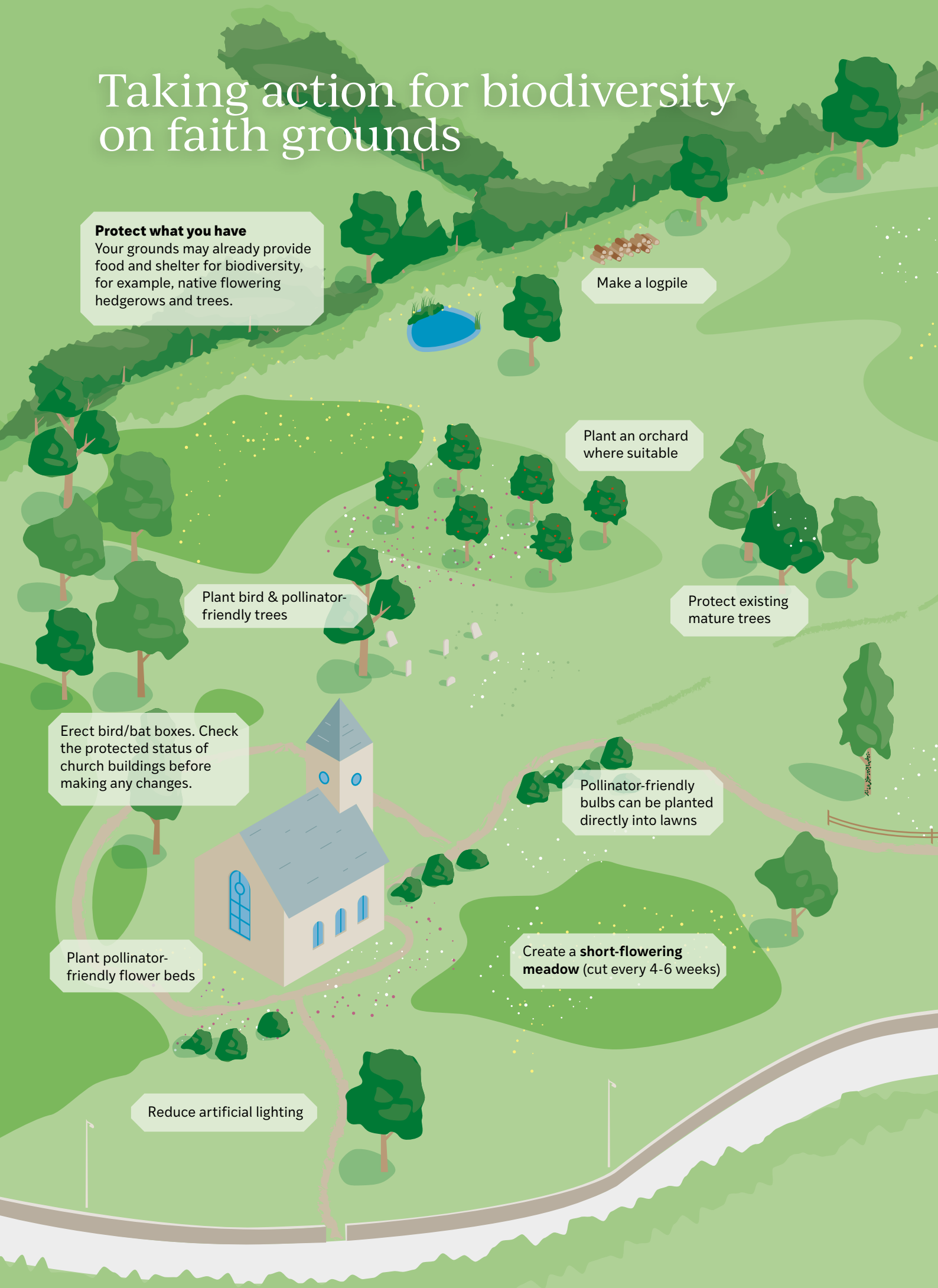
This guide is intended for faith leaders, parish groups, volunteers and community members. The focus is on actions that are evidence-based, realistic, low-cost and achievable by local groups working together. It recommends a holistic approach to all aspects of heritage, to ensure that actions taken for natural heritage don't have negative impacts on other important aspects of heritage, such as archaeology.

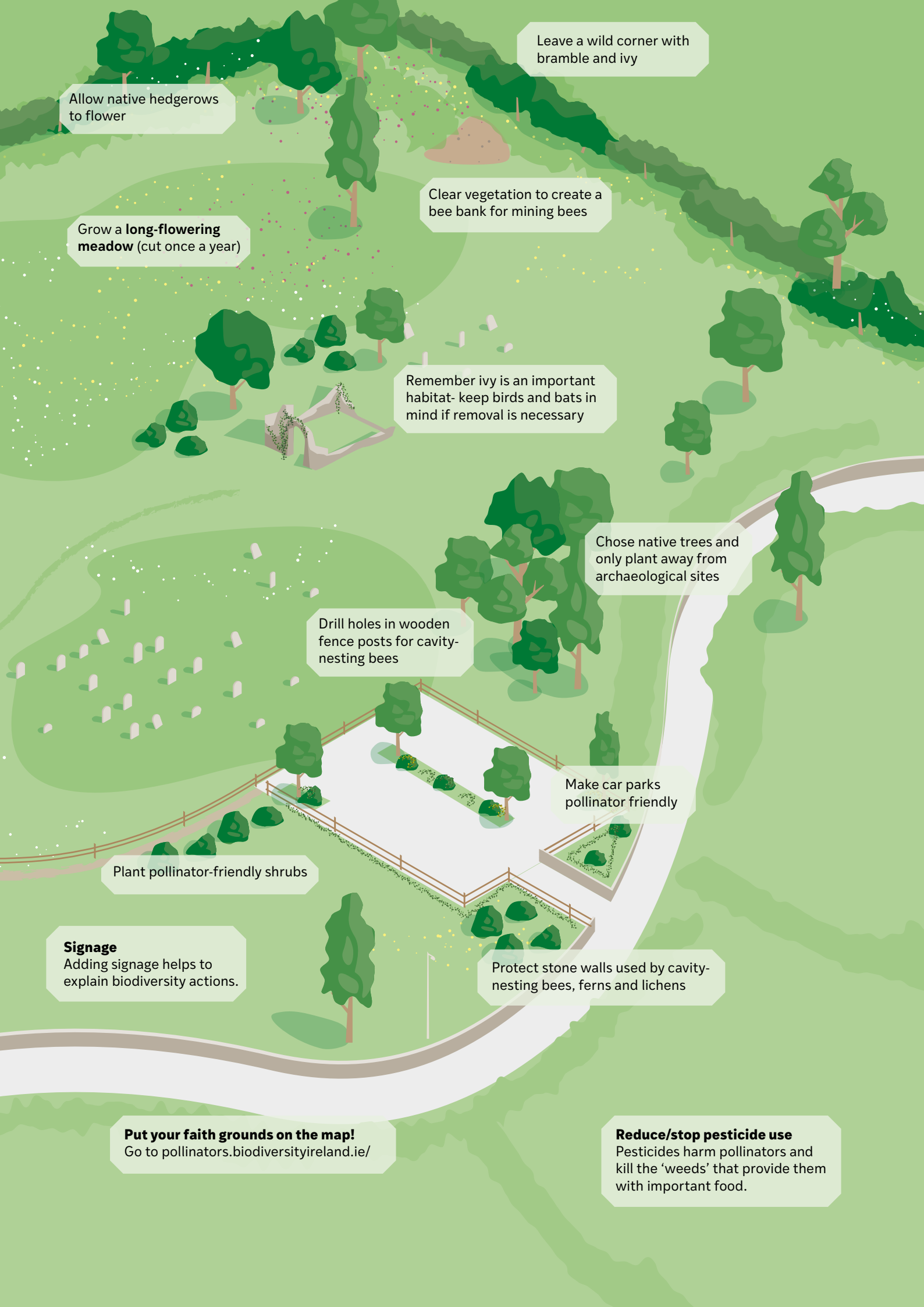
The guidance is structured around different types of habitats and species that are common in faith grounds, alongside practical topics such as legal duties, accessibility and training. Case studies from different faith traditions offer examples of what is already being achieved around the country.

Central to this guidance is the concept of creating a Plan for Wildlife — a site-wide plan that brings together all the actions for your grounds. This plan should ensure that actions to support nature are coordinated, realistic, and sensitive to the built and cultural heritage of each place. Faith traditions have long taught respect for creation and care for community. By bringing biodiversity conservation into the management of faith grounds, your Plan for Wildlife invites your community to act on those values in a practical and visible way.

> *"The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth."*
>
> – Chief Seattle
> (Leader of the Duwamish and Suquamish peoples)

Taking action for biodiversity on faith grounds




Leave a wild corner with bramble and ivy
Allow native hedgerows to flower
Clear vegetation to create a bee bank for mining bees
Grow a **long-flowering meadow** (cut once a year)
Remember ivy is an important habitat- keep birds and bats in mind if removal is necessary
Chose native trees and only plant away from archaeological sites
Drill holes in wooden fence posts for cavity-nesting bees
Make car parks pollinator friendly
Plant pollinator-friendly shrubs
Signage
Adding signage helps to explain biodiversity actions.
Protect stone walls used by cavity-nesting bees, ferns and lichens
Put your faith grounds on the map!
Go to pollinators.biodiversityireland.ie/
Reduce/stop pesticide use
Pesticides harm pollinators and kill the 'weeds' that provide them with important food.

Getting started

Establish a biodiversity team within your faith community

Your first step should be to meet with key members of your faith community and those who manage the grounds, and establish a dedicated biodiversity team. You could organise a community event to inform members of the faith community and faith leaders about plans to manage the grounds for biodiversity, ask attendees for ideas, and invite them to get involved in the initiative.

You might also want to work with other local groups, such as the local Tidy Towns association, youth groups, local schools or perhaps a local Men's Shed, some of which may have members with practical skills that could be useful in carrying out biodiversity actions. More suggestions on how to spread the word in your faith community are outlined on page 52.

Get advice early on

It is worthwhile to reach out to your Local Authority Biodiversity Officer. There may already be a Local Biodiversity Action Plan for your City or County, which will inform and complement your plans. A local Community Biodiversity Action Plan may also be available – check at actionforbiodiversity.ie.

If your plan includes actions at a historic graveyard or burial ground, check ownership and conservation status so that you are clear on what permission is needed for any works. Contact your Local Authority Heritage Officer well in advance for advice and guidance.

See page 60 for contact details for your local Biodiversity Officer and Heritage Officer.

Protect what you already have

Many faith grounds will already contain very good wildlife habitats, so it is important to start by identifying and protecting what is already there, such as trees, hedgerows, meadows or wild corners. It is helpful to understand how different species use these features, and to include actions in your Plan for Wildlife that will protect and enhance these existing habitats. This will also help to ensure you don't waste any time or effort!

> *Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it."*
>
> (Laudato si', 139)

Create a biodiversity map

> Creating a map is a great way to visualise and record the different habitats and actions on your site. It is worth checking if any members of your community are skilled at drawing. The map does not have to be perfect. Feel free to be creative.

Step 1: Draw your base map

Online mapping resources such as Google Maps or GeoHive can be used to produce an aerial picture of your site. You can use this image to help sketch an outline of your faith grounds.

Step 2: Mark key landmarks

On your outline, show:

- Building footprints, entrances, paths, any hard surfaces like car parks, and so on.
- Orientation (north, south, east, west) using the aerial view, or a compass.
- Make a note of any banks and wet areas.

Step 3: Record habitats and features

- Mark trees, shrubs, hedgerows, flower beds, areas with bulbs, or compost heaps.
- Where possible, identify tree and shrub species.
- Mark areas of short-mown grass and longer grass.
- Mark any areas currently unmanaged.

Step 4: Keep your map as a living record

Hold onto a master copy as your starting point. You can return to it each year to add new features. Over time, this will become a record of both your site's biodiversity and your community's efforts to support it.

Carry out a biodiversity survey

In addition to mapping the various habitats on your faith grounds, you could carry out plant and animal surveys, which will give you a more detailed picture of the biodiversity on the grounds. There may be a local expert or someone in your faith community who can help to record certain groups, for example, birds. For further surveys, you may be able to source funding, for example, through the Heritage Council's Community Heritage Grant Scheme. This could allow you to work with an ecologist to do a full biodiversity audit, recording all the existing plants and animals on your site.

Of course, you can still take action for biodiversity without completing extensive surveying.

Create your Plan for Wildlife

Once you have chosen your biodiversity actions from those outlined in this guide, writing a practical plan specific to your site will help to explain actions, and record who is doing what, where, when and how. It is important to agree everything in your plan, well in advance, with the faith leader(s) responsible for the site, and, most importantly, with whoever is managing the grounds. Your plan can also serve as a useful tool for communicating with the faith community and explaining why some changes may take place. It should be made accessible to all.

Include the following in your Plan for Wildlife:

- Your biodiversity map and results from any biodiversity surveys.
- Your short, medium and long-term goals.
  - Quick wins (see pages 16-17) can be a great way to get everyone on board. On the other hand, some actions that take time to get established can be the most beneficial for nature, for example, new hedgerows.
- A list of actions, including who, when, where and how.
- A list of ways individuals can get involved and contact details for the biodiversity team.

Quick wins – actions you can take now

> Want to get started straight away? These six steps cost little or nothing, don't require specialist tools, and can show visible results within a single season. They also build confidence for bigger projects later on.

Always check before you begin that your actions will not disturb existing built and cultural heritage, including headstones or archaeological features. If you are unsure, check with your Local Authority Heritage Officer.

1 Leave a wild corner

Why: Brambles and ivy provide flowers for pollinators and berries for birds. Nettles and dead stems provide breeding places for butterflies and beetles.

How: Pick a discreet 3×3m patch and stop mowing or tidying. Mark with a sign such as 'Wildlife refuge – please do not disturb'.

2 Create a wildflower patch

Why: When you reduce grass-cutting, wildflowers such as dandelion, self-heal, clover, or ox-eye daisy grow naturally, feeding bees, butterflies and hoverflies.

How: For a short-flowering meadow area, raise the mower height, cut only every 4-6 weeks, and always remove clippings. For a long-flowering meadow, cut once, each September. Don't use commercial wildflower seed, which can contain non native or invasive plant seed.

3 Reduce or eliminate pesticide use

Why: Pesticides harm pollinators and remove the very plants they rely on for nectar and pollen.

How: Ask contractors or volunteers to use hoes, brushes, hand-weeding or a pressure cleaner instead. Tolerate some 'weeds' where possible. If you cannot avoid using herbicides, spot-treat rather than using blanket sprays and aim to phase out herbicide use.

(Use only licensed products for invasive species and seek expert advice before application.)

> *Real change will only happen when we fall in love with our planet.”*
>
> — Thich Nhat Hanh, Love Letter to the Earth

4 Provide clean water

Why: Birds and mammals need access to clean water for drinking and bathing. Even a small pool attracts wildlife.

How: Set out a birdbath, shallow dish or upcycled sink, with a stone added so animals can climb in and out easily. Place in sun or partial shade. Refill in dry weather and scrub out algae monthly (no detergents).

5 Turn off lights

Why: Artificial lighting disturbs bats, moths and plants. Lighting also uses energy and adds to carbon emissions.

How: Switch off floodlights and porch lamps when the last service or meeting ends. Use timers or sensors. If overnight lighting is needed, fit warm-white LEDs (≤2700 K) and angle them downwards.

6 Create a log pile

Why: Decaying wood supports insects, which in turn feed birds, bats and hedgehogs.

How: Stack a few short logs or branches in a shady corner. Use wind-felled wood or prunings, putting the thickest at the base. Leave bark on. Keep log piles away from headstones and walls.

Embrace some wildness!

Faith grounds often look tidy, but leaving some areas untended is one of the most effective ways to support biodiversity. Wild patches provide food, shelter and breeding places for a wide range of species, many of which pass unnoticed until you look more closely. Wild areas can be tucked away, out of public view, if this is important to your community.

Dead wood and leaf litter

In nature, dead wood and leaf litter are as important as living plants. They host fungi, worms and many insects, such as centipedes and beetles, which in turn feed birds and small mammals. Adding log piles, compost heaps and leaf piles are simple ways to recreate this habitat. Place them in quiet corners, ideally near hedgerows or trees (but not against walls, headstones or archaeological features). Frogs, newts and lizards will also benefit.

Pygmy shrew

Did you know?

A single teaspoon of soil can contain up to 10 billion organisms – that's more than the number of people on the planet!

> *"It may well disturb us to learn of the extinction of mammals or birds, since they are more visible. But the good functioning of ecosystems also requires fungi, algae, worms, insects, reptiles and an innumerable variety of micro-organisms. Some species, although unseen, nevertheless play a critical role in maintaining the equilibrium of a particular place"*
>
> (Laudato si', 34)

The common lizard is Ireland's only reptile.

Amazing nettles, bramble and ivy

Plants often seen as weeds are in fact essential for wildlife.

- Nettles are foodplants for the caterpillars of small tortoiseshell, peacock, comma, red admiral and painted lady butterflies. Ladybirds hunt aphids among nettles, and birds eat the seed in late summer.
- Bramble provides nectar for pollinators in summer, berries for birds in autumn, and dense cover for nesting birds, hedgehogs and mice.
- Ivy flowers late in the year, supplying nectar for bumblebee queens before hibernation. Its berries sustain birds through the winter, while ivy foliage offers roost sites for bats, nesting sites for birds, and shelter for insects. Of course, ivy roots can also be damaging to fragile masonry, so its retention should be carefully planned and managed. If ivy has to be removed for conservation reasons, this should be done outside the bird-nesting season (March to September).
- Other plants, such as holly, bird's-foot-trefoil and cuckoo flower, also support specialist insects and are worth encouraging.

The cuckoo flower or 'lady's smock' is the foodplant for the orange-tip butterfly

Bramble provides an important source of pollen and nectar for bees, as well as fruit for birds and mammals.

Blackbird enjoying ivy berries

Stinging nettle is the foodplant of a number of butterfly caterpillars, including the small tortoiseshell and peacock.

Meadows

Some grasslands are far richer habitats for wildlife than others. The most valuable are semi-natural grasslands – fields that have never been reseeded or fertilised. Because they have been managed in this low-intensity way for generations, without the use of chemicals, they support a wide range of wildflowers and a variety of grasses. Their diverse mix of native plants provides food and shelter for many species, making them among the most important habitats for biodiversity in Ireland.

A meadow is a type of semi-natural grassland. Once common on Irish farms, traditional hay meadows have declined sharply over the last 50 years. In summer, these meadows can hold hundreds of flowers in a single square metre and support thousands of insects, from bees and hoverflies to grasshoppers, butterflies and moths. This in turn benefits amphibians, reptiles, small mammals and birds.

Different wildflowers bloom from spring through to late autumn. Each needs time to flower and set seed in order to return the following year. The later the meadow is cut, the more species can complete this cycle, and the richer the grassland becomes.

Faith grounds and graveyards, both old and new, often contain patches of semi-natural grassland, even if currently cut short for a lawn. Simply mowing less often and removing cuttings can allow those hidden plants to flower and support wildlife.

Bluebells are native wildflowers that may appear near patches of old woodland. (Be careful not to plant Spanish bluebells, which aren't native.)

We have 30 native orchid species in Ireland. If you are reducing grass-cutting, you might experience the lovely surprise of an orchid popping up in your meadow area.

Identify areas to manage as meadows

Any grassy area can be managed as a meadow: lawn cemeteries, larger lawns, grassy strips along boundaries, or even small patches. The aim should be to reduce mowing wherever possible, so that wildflowers can bloom, supporting pollinators and other wildlife.

Wildflowers grow best in infertile soil, so it is very important to always remove grass cuttings. Mulching cut grass back into the lawn increases the soil fertility, and this favours grass growth over wildflowers. Over time, delayed cutting and the removal of cut grass will encourage flower seeds in the soil to grow. The best results come in sunny areas. Don't sow commercial wildflower seed mixes – they can contain non-native or invasive species and can displace the local flora.

In historic graveyards, old grassland may conceal unmarked burials. Do not level ground or dig – the uneven ground profile should be retained, and any changes to management should take this into account. Discuss the possibility of burials in advance and avoid disturbance of sensitive areas.

> *"Consider how the wildflowers grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these"*
>
> Luke, 12:27-28

A short-flowering wildflower meadow developed through reduced mowing on church grounds in Co Clare.


Dead Nettle


Bird's-foot-Trefoil


Selfheal


Red Clover


Ox-eye daisy

Managing grass-cutting for biodiversity

- **Short-flowering meadow**: Mow every 4–6 weeks. This keeps a neat appearance while allowing daisies, clover, dandelions, bird's-foot-trefoil, and other low-growing flowers to bloom.
- **Long-flowering meadow:** Mow once or twice a year, ideally in September/October and, if needed, again in early March. This allows flowers to complete their life cycle and set seed for the following year. It also provides undisturbed habitat for insects and birds.
- **Always remove cuttings:** Leaving cut grass increases soil fertility, which favours coarse grasses over wildflowers. Removing cuttings gradually lowers fertility, helping wildflowers to thrive. Place cut material on a compost heap away from headstones or historic structures.
- **Be patient:** A meadow may take several years to develop. At certain times it may look 'untidy' compared to a lawn, so it is important to discuss the change with the community.

Different mowing regimes have been applied here, resulting in a short-flowering meadow in foreground and long-flowering meadow to rear.

Planning for meadow management

After reviewing the different grassy areas on your site, set out a simple grass management plan for groundskeepers or contractors. Record the planned cutting regime for each area, noting how often it should be mown and how cuttings should be removed. Including this detail within your overall Plan for Wildlife will also make it clear how grass is being managed, and will help track changes over time.

Community support

Visible signs or noticeboard messages can reassure people that the new approach is purposeful. Cutting clear pathways through meadow areas and keeping neat edges will help to reinforce the message that this is planned management, as opposed to neglect.

To learn more, download the *How-to guide: Creating and Restoring Meadows in Local Communities and Gardens*

Don’t sow - let it grow!

Commercial wildflower seed mixes are often marketed as pollinator-friendly, but they are unregulated and may contain non-native or even invasive plants, which can harm local wildlife and farmland. They can undermine local habitats and genetic diversity. Instead, allow the existing seeds in the soil to grow. Our pollinators have evolved to feed on these native wildflowers. Where seed is needed, collect small amounts from nearby native plants to ensure the local character is retained.

Garden bumblebee

Hedgerows

Hedgerows are among the richest habitats for wildlife in Ireland. They provide food, shelter and safe wildlife corridors for insects, birds, bats, and small mammals. Blossom, berries, and seeds ensure a year-round supply of resources. Dense cover offers nesting sites, while sunny edges and sheltered banks provide places for wildflowers and solitary bees.

Many of our native hedgerows have been removed and others are declining in value through poor management. Protecting and managing what remains, and planting new native hedgerows in suitable areas, are simple ways faith grounds can contribute to nature in a very important way.

Protecting and managing native hedgerows

A good hedge is tall, dense and irregular in shape, not cut back to a neat box shape. If you choose to trim native hedgerows, cutting should be done on a cycle, with some sections left untrimmed each year so that blossom and berries are always available.

To protect nesting birds, Irish law prohibits cutting between March and August (except for road safety reasons), so cutting should be planned outside that time. At the base of a hedge, leave a strip of at least two metres free from mowing or spraying. This space allows wildflowers to thrive, and creates feeding and nesting areas for many species. The most valuable native hedge is usually the one already in place, but where gaps exist, planting in new native plants can make a real difference.

Hedgerows that are cut too hard, too low or too often can't produce flowers for pollinators, nor berries for birds.

Hawthorn in flower

Leaving an uncut 2-metre buffer at the hedge base provides a refuge for wildflowers, small mammals and nesting bumblebees.

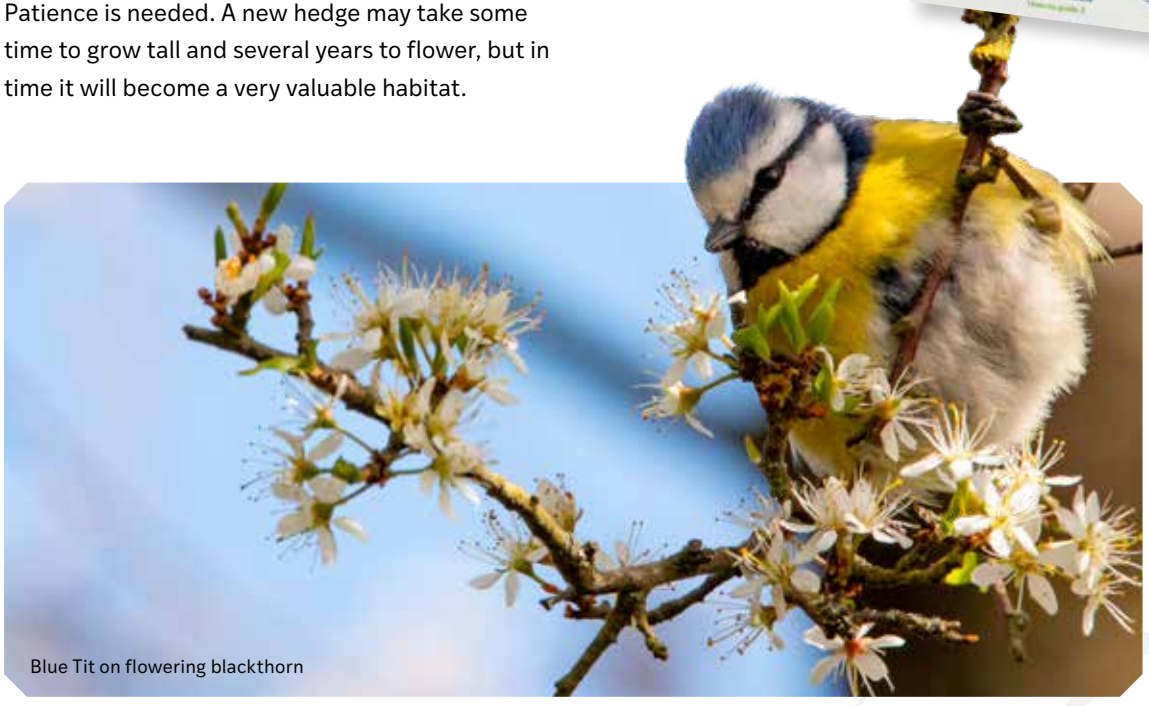
Planting new native hedgerows

To recreate our traditional native hedgerows, the ideal mix is 75% hawthorn and 25% of at least four other native species, such as blackthorn, hazel, holly, spindle, willow, rowan, crab apple or wild rose. Plants grown from seed collected in Ireland are best adapted to local soils and wildlife, and sourcing locally grown trees and shrubs will also reduce the risk of importing pests or diseases.

It is important to avoid unsuitable shrubs such as Leylandii or laurel, which offer little for biodiversity. Laurel is also an invasive species. Patience is needed. A new hedge may take some time to grow tall and several years to flower, but in time it will become a very valuable habitat.


Hawthorn or whitethorn blossom

To find out more, download the *How to guide: Hedgerows for Pollinators*


Blue Tit on flowering blackthorn

If you have space, an oak tree is a very special native tree, supporting over 250 insect species alone.

Trees

Trees are landmarks in faith grounds. A single mature oak, yew or ash can host hundreds of species, from lichens and fungi to insects, birds and bats. Veteran or old trees are especially valuable: their hollows, dead wood and cavities support creatures that cannot live elsewhere. Unless a tree is unsafe, it should be retained. Recording notable trees - particularly large or old trees - on the Tree Register of Ireland helps to recognise their significance and may guide their future care.

Tree lines, where trees stand in a row along a boundary or avenue, can perform a similar role to hedgerows, acting as wildlife corridors. Small patches of woodland offer shade, shelter and seasonal colour. A cluster of birch, rowan or alder can provide food and cover for wildlife, while also locking away carbon. When planting new trees, it is important to choose the right tree for the right place (see the Tree Council's guide). Check that there is space for the mature tree; avoid areas with overhead wires or underground services; and never plant in species-rich meadows or historic graveyards, where tree roots could cause harm by disturbing underground archaeology and burials.

Birch can be identified by its silver peeling bark. It supports over 200 different insects and over 100 lichens. In spring, its seed-rich catkins attract birds.

Hazel is a small native tree that produces hazelnuts in autumn for birds and mammals

Carrigaline Church, Co. Cork

"Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy."

(Psalm 96:12)

Planting native trees is a positive climate action and will greatly benefit local biodiversity as well as human health and wellbeing.

Bird-friendly trees

In addition to providing shelter for birds and the insects they feed on, these native trees also offer food as seeds or berries: alder, alder buckthorn, bird cherry, crab apple, blackthorn, elder, rowan, spindle, whitebeam, wild privet, wild cherry, and yew.

Bullfinch feeding on the berries of rowan or mountain ash

Pollinator-friendly trees

Willow, such as grey/goat willow, is a very important food source for pollinators in early spring, when bumblebee queens emerge from hibernation. Growing other native species, like whitethorn, blackthorn, rowan, crab apple or wild cherry as individual mature trees will also provide food for pollinators.

> *Uproot greed, anger and delusion, not the sacred forests of the Earth"*
>
> (Buddhist teaching)

Did you know?

Choosing native species is important, but where these plants come from matters, too. A hawthorn grown from Irish seed is better suited to local soils and climate than one grown abroad, even though both are the same species. This is known as 'local provenance'. Plants of local provenance leaf and flower at the right time for Irish insects and birds, are more resilient in Irish conditions, and choosing local provenance plants reduces the risk of pests or disease arriving from overseas. It also helps to conserve the genetic diversity that makes Irish woodlands and hedgerows distinctive. Several Irish nurseries now supply native provenance trees and shrubs. Always check with your supplier.

A community orchard offers blossom for bees and fruit for wildlife and people.

Apple blossom

Community orchards

Faith communities with land outside of historic sites could consider planting a small orchard. Traditional orchards with heritage apple, pear or plum varieties are part of Ireland's cultural landscape. In spring, blossom is a valuable food source for pollinators, and in autumn, the fruit feeds birds, mammals, and people alike. Heritage varieties are well adapted to Irish conditions and often need less intervention than modern cultivars.

For more advice, see the *How-to-guide Traditional Orchards and Fruit Trees for pollinators on the farm*

Trees can create special places for contemplation. Above: Sunyata Buddhist Centre, Co Clare

Burial grounds

Burial grounds across all faith traditions are places of remembrance and care. They hold layered heritage in one place – natural, built and cultural. Old stone, undisturbed soils, native hedgerows, mature trees and long-established grassland create niches for lichens, wildflowers, insects, birds and bats. Good stewardship means looking after biodiversity without damaging archaeology, memorials or historic fabric.

> *The entire material universe speaks of God's love, God's boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is a caress of God...*
> *God has written a precious book, whose letters are the multitude of created things."*
>
> (Laudato Si', 84)

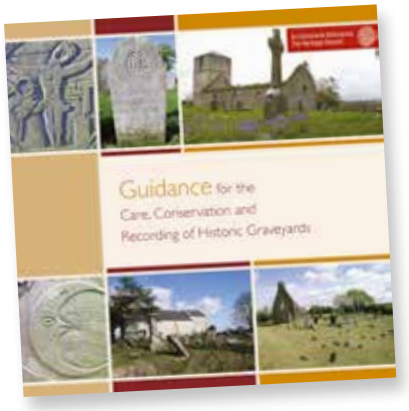
What to value in burial grounds

- **Species-rich grassland:** Use a short-flowering or long-flowering meadow approach. Remove all cuttings to reduce fertility and encourage wildflowers. If neatness is important, the edges can be kept mown and tidy.
- **Stone walls and earth banks:** Lime-mortared and dry-stone boundaries support mosses, ferns, solitary bees, small mammals and lizards. Repair sensitively under expert guidance. Retain crevices.
- **Ruins and towers:** Often used by bats and nesting birds, and home to specialist plants. Time any works to avoid disturbance and follow ecological and archaeological advice.
- **Trees and ivy:** Veteran yews and other old trees provide cavities and dead wood for wildlife. Retain unless unsafe. Allow ivy on trees and boundary walls where safe. Manage ivy on monuments only under expert guidance.
- **Sunny bare ground:** South-facing patches support mining solitary bees. Keep these bare areas.
- **Memorials with lichens:** Lichens indicate clean air and host small invertebrates. Do not scrub, sand, power-wash or use chemicals. This can damage the engravings. Avoid strimming or spraying at memorial bases. Trim using hand tools in autumn if needed.

Graveyards often contain areas that have never been sprayed or fertilised, so they can contain a natural seed bank of wildflowers.

Light-touch management

- Engage with the faith community, agree zones and cutting schedule, and maintain clear access.
- Map and photograph features, natural and built, to guide decisions and track change.
- Seek advice early. Contact your Local Authority Heritage Officer and Biodiversity Officer.
- Some works need consent. Confirm legal requirements and timing constraints for protected species.
- Mow with purpose. Favour later cuts where appropriate, remove cuttings, and avoid chemicals.
- Use hand tools around memorials and paths. Do not open new paths or level 'humps and bumps', which may mark burials or structures.
- Do not plant new trees in historic graveyards. In modern cemeteries, if planting is appropriate, use native, locally sourced trees and shrubs in agreed zones.
- Invasive species: Inspect land annually and act early where invasive plants occur. See invasives.ie for detailed guidance.



Burial grounds are sensitive places. Alongside biodiversity, they contain historic memorials, archaeology, architecture, oral traditions and community memory. Any management must take account of these other forms of heritage. Action for wildlife should never come at the cost of damaging monuments, disturbing burials, or erasing the cultural meaning that makes these sites important to the communities who care for them. Guidance for the Care, Conservation and Recording of Historic Graveyards is available from the Heritage Council.

Did you know?

A lichen is not a single organism, but a partnership. A fungus joins with an alga or cyanobacterium, each providing what the other needs. The alga makes food through photosynthesis, while the fungus offers structure. This mutual support is called symbiosis, and it allows lichens to survive in places where few other species can.

Buildings and walls

Faith buildings, from medieval churches to newer halls, often provide valuable shelter for wildlife. Stone walls, towers and cellars can mimic the cliffs and caves on which many species once relied. Eaves, ledges and chimneys offer safe places to roost or nest. These structures are living habitats as well as being places of gathering and worship. Because many are protected structures or recorded monuments, heritage constraints must be identified at the outset. Even what might seem like small changes – such as adding a nest box, adjusting lighting or re-pointing mortar – can require consent, and poor timing or methods can damage historic fabric and disturb wildlife.

Old stone buildings can offer countless hiding places: cracks, crevices, alcoves, cavities and ledges all provide sites for roosting bats and nesting birds. Many bird species are closely tied to buildings and will return to the same site year after year. These include Kestrel, Barn Owl, Swift, Starling, Swallow, House Martin, Peregrine, and Spotted Flycatcher. The first step in protecting them is to find out which species are present. Once their needs are understood, faith communities can take practical steps to ensure that these remarkable creatures continue to thrive alongside us. Some birds that are not currently present can be tempted to occupy an area if suitable habitat is provided, such as a hedgerow, meadow or nest box.

Roosting sites for bats and birds in buildings should never be disturbed. A local bat or bird group, or an ecologist, can help to identify the species present and advise on how best to support them (see pages 38-41 for more on bats and birds).

Kestrel is a bird of high conservation concern.

Did you know?

In Irish, the Barn Owl is called *scréachóg reilige* — 'the screecher of the graveyard'. These owls were once familiar around churches and graveyards, where rough grass and old buildings provided ideal hunting and nesting places. Caring for these spaces today can help this iconic bird to recover.

Hart's-tongue fern

Maidenhair spleenwort

Ivy-leaved toadflax

Ivy is one of the most useful plants for pollinators, bats and birds, offering food, cover and nesting sites. However, on old mortar and stonework, its roots can sometimes cause damage. Where ivy is present, assess the conditions carefully, ideally with advice from your Local Authority Heritage Officer. If ivy must be removed as part of a planned conservation project, do so outside the bird-nesting season and, where possible, create new habitats nearby to replace what is lost.

Old stonework often supports a remarkable community of plants. Over a hundred species of lichens have been recorded on historic buildings in Ireland, many of them indicators of clean air. Ferns such as wall-rue, maidenhair spleenwort, rustyback and polypody, along with mosses, frequently grow on stone, too. These do not cause damage, so there is no need to remove them.

Red mason bee - In sun-warmed walls with soft mortar, solitary mason bees may be found nesting. They are harmless to the structure and to people.

Goldfinch

Water

All wildlife needs water. Even a damp corner, a seasonal puddle or a shallow basin can provide a water source for insects, amphibians, birds and mammals. In faith grounds, wet areas often go unnoticed, yet they may be valuable habitats.

> *"Air is the Guru, Water is the Father, and Earth is the Great Mother of all."*
>
> Guru Granth Sahib, Ang. 8

Valuing wet areas

If your site has a naturally wet or marshy area, treat it as an asset. Such places attract frogs, newts, dragonflies, damselflies, bees and butterflies. They also support plants that thrive in damp soils, such as marsh marigold, purple loosestrife, meadowsweet, creeping jenny, water avens, hemp agrimony and water forget-me-not. Protect these habitats from drainage, spraying or infilling, and let them develop as mini-wetlands.

Flag iris in a wetland area at Sunyata Buddhist Centre, Co Clare.

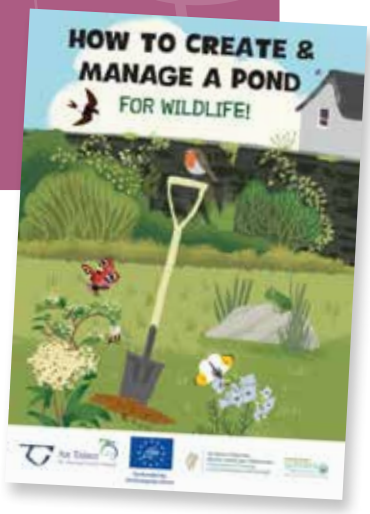
Emperor Dragonfly

Small pools

Where space is tight or where sensitive archaeology means that digging the ground is not advisable, a small pool can still make a big difference. A ceramic pot, sink or large dish filled with rainwater creates a drinking spot for birds and mammals, and a home for aquatic invertebrates. Position in a sunny or lightly shaded spot, add a stone as a ramp, and top it up in dry weather. Even small features like this quickly attract life.

Did you know?

Freshwater is one of the most species-rich habitats in Ireland. A small pond can support more than 100 species of plants and animals. Dragonflies, damselflies and amphibians depend on shallow water for breeding. Even temporary pools that dry up in summer play a role, giving a home to specialist insects that cannot live anywhere else.



A pond in the right place

Ponds provide breeding sites for amphibians and dragonflies, beetles and water snails. But they must be sited with care. Digging should never take place in protected habitats, near holy wells, or in historic graveyards where archaeology could be disturbed. For invaluable guidance on ponds, see An Taisce's pond resources

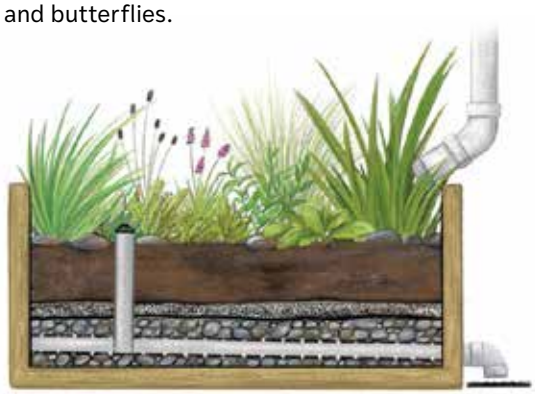

Common frog


Smooth newt

Rainwater planters

Rainwater planters, sometimes called 'rain gardens', slow the flow of water from rooftops, reducing flooding and filtering pollutants. At the same time, they provide habitat for pollinator-friendly plants such as brooklime, cuckooflower, devil's-bit scabious and marsh marigold. A simple timber planter, lined with soil and gravel, can turn rainwater into a resource for nature, helping bees and butterflies.


Meadowsweet is a native moisture-loving plant.


For guidance see 'Make a pollinator-friendly rainwater planter'

Light

Artificial light at night is increasing across towns and villages. Light pollution, meaning unwanted or excessive artificial light, can affect people's health, hinder astronomy and star-gazing, waste energy, and disrupt wildlife and habitats. Many animals rely on darkness to feed, rest and navigate. On faith grounds, modest changes to when, where, and how lights are used can make a real difference.

Why darkness matters for wildlife

Artificial light at night disrupts the natural circadian rhythm of many living things. Night-flying insects, including moths that pollinate after dusk, are drawn to bright light. Birds such as Robins and Blackbirds sing and forage under artificial light, using energy needed for survival. Bats avoid lit routes between their roosting and feeding areas, fragmenting habitat and exposing them to predators. Even a single bright lamp can block a bat's flight line along a hedge or wall.

Simple lighting principles from Dark Sky Ireland

Use the right light, in the right place, for the right time. If planning to install lighting, ask if it is really necessary, and think about how light will impact the area, including wildlife and habitats. Aim lights downwards and use fully covered fittings so no light escapes upward or sideways. Choose a warm colour of light, around 2700 K or lower, which contains less blue and is less disruptive to many species.

Keep brightness low, use only the light level needed for the task, and fit timers or motion sensors so lights come on only when someone is present. Avoid lighting trees, hedgerows, stone walls, water or grassland, which act as wildlife corridors. Avoid floodlighting buildings or monuments, which adds glare and creates skyglow, the glow seen over towns from wasted light.

Built heritage sensitivities

Many faith buildings are historic or protected structures. Poorly planned lighting can damage masonry and disturb roosting bats and nesting birds. Before replacing lighting, check if consent is required and seek early advice from a conservation professional or the local authority. Avoid new fixings into historic stone or brick; reuse existing fixings where possible; keep works reversible and discreet.

Guidance is available from:

Dark Sky Ireland: Environmentally Friendly Lighting Guide

All-Ireland Pollinator Plan: How To Guide: Protecting Nocturnal Pollinators

Very bad | **Bad** | **Better** | **Good** | **Good** (for bats & insects) | **Best**

It is important to consider colour temperature, suitable power and intensity, appropriate beam distribution, mounting height and tilt angle, employed with a dimming or switch-off schedule.

Case Study:

St Patrick's Church

> The community of Newport, Co Mayo, worked with Mayo Dark Skies to reduce glare, skyglow and unnecessary light spill while maintaining safe access at St Patrick's Church.

A new lighting design with bespoke LED fittings, aimed to eliminate light pollution, balancing visual, social and environmental objectives, while enhancing the night-time experience for both people and biodiversity. The award-winning result not only protects wildlife and enhances built heritage, through 50% reduction in light pollution, but also fights climate change, with the new lighting saving over two tonnes of carbon dioxide per year.

Before:
Broad floodlighting created glare and skyglow around the church and surroundings.

After:
Dark-sky-friendly controlled lighting provides targeted illumination without adding unnecessary light spill. Lighting design by Dark Source.

Pollinators

In Ireland, pollination is mainly carried out by our wild bees – bumblebees and solitary bees. Twenty one bumblebees and about 80 solitary bee species are found here. Hoverflies, butterflies, moths and other insects play a smaller but important role in pollination.

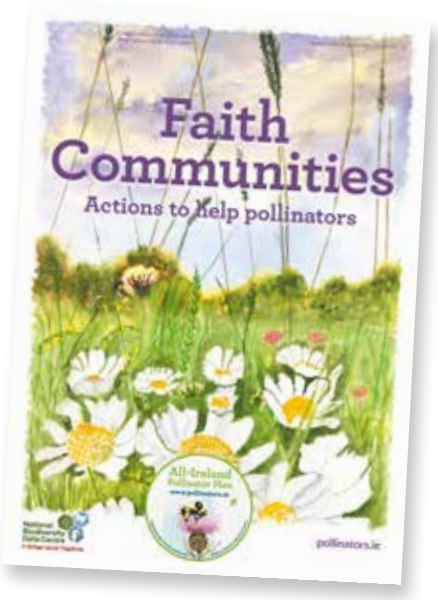
Many of our pollinators are in decline. In fact, one-third of our wild bee species are threatened with extinction. Loss of flower-rich habitats and the widespread use of pesticides are key drivers in the loss of pollinators. But there is plenty we can do to help reverse these declines. The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan is a framework that brings together different sectors across the island of Ireland to create a landscape where pollinators can survive and thrive. Tailored guidelines and helpful how-to guides outline how communities and individuals can help.

Like us, pollinators need a balanced diet. They rely on a variety of flowering trees, shrubs and wildflowers. They also need safe places to nest – long grass, hedge bases, bare soil, stone crevices and old wood. The management described in the previous chapters on meadows and native hedgerows will already support pollinators, but there are lots of other actions that can help.

> *"May all beings look at me with the eye of a friend! May I look at all beings with the eye of a friend!"*
>
> (Yajur Veda 36.18)

Planning for pollinators

Every site is different, but all pollinators need the same things: flowers across the seasons, nesting places, and safety from pesticides. When preparing your Plan for Wildlife, include a section on how the grounds will meet these needs. Note the areas where you will reduce grass-cutting, and where bare soil, old walls, drilled wood or bee hotels can provide nesting sites. Setting this out clearly makes it easier to see if food and shelter are available throughout the year and to track improvements over time. The Faith Communities - Actions to help pollinators guidelines give further ideas on how to take pollinator-friendly action, including lists of pollinator-friendly flowers, shrubs and trees.



Planting for Pollinators

Flowers like tulips and daffodils look attractive to people, but they are not a good food source for pollinators. They have been bred to be showy flowers, but don't produce good stores of pollen and nectar. Consider adding other bulbs that are pollinator-friendly, for instance, snowdrop, crocus, grape hyacinth or allium.

Annual flowers, such as begonias and petunias, do not generally provide food for pollinators. Continuously planting and replacing annuals each year is also not sustainable or cost-effective. You might add some pollinator-friendly perennial plants into future planting schemes to provide pollen from spring through to autumn across a number of years. Perennials are much more sustainable because they can have a life span of 10-12 years if well planted and maintained.

Just some of the pollinator-friendly plants that can provide pollen and nectar across the seasons.
© All-Ireland Pollinator Plan

Creating nesting areas for solitary bees and bumblebees

Solitary bees nest either in bare ground or in small cavities. Mining bees need south- or east-facing patches of exposed soil. A nesting bank can be created by simply removing vegetation from a sunny slope and leaving it undisturbed.

Cavity-nesting bees use holes in wood or masonry. You can mimic these by drilling untreated timber (such as fence posts) with holes of 4-8mm diameter and at least 10cm in depth, about 2m above ground. You might also consider erecting small bee hotels at the same height. Very large 'bug hotels' are not recommended as they can attract predators and harbour disease.

Bumblebees usually nest in abandoned mouse burrows or tussocky grass. Queens search for nesting places in early spring, so the base of hedgerows should be left uncut from March to November. Colonies die off in winter, leaving only mated queens to hibernate until the following year.

Pesticides, such as weed-killers, can poison our wild bees, so eliminating pesticide use around these nesting sites will help protect our wild bees.

Learn more from the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan's How-to Guide: Creating wild pollinator nesting habitat

It's easy to create a bee bank by removing vegetation from south- or east-facing soil.

Red mason bee using a bee hotel

Ashy mining bee

Citizen science

Monitoring pollinators helps to track their numbers and contributes to national data. Why not get involved in the All-Ireland Bumblebee Monitoring Scheme or carry out simple Flower-Insect Timed Counts (FIT Counts)?

Mapping your actions on the 'Actions for Pollinators' website helps to build the national picture of pollinator-friendly habitats.

All-Ireland Bumblebee Monitoring Scheme
biodiversityireland.ie/surveys/bumblebee-monitoring-scheme

FIT Counts
biodiversityireland.ie/surveys/fit-counts

Actions for Pollinators mapping system
pollinators.biodiversityireland.ie

Red-Tailed Bumblebees on knapweed.

A note on honeybees

Beekeeping is a great hobby, and the native black honeybee is an important part of Ireland's heritage. However, keeping beehives is not a biodiversity action – it will not help wild pollinators. In fact, too many honeybees can actually cause competition for food with our struggling wild bees.

Birds

Birds are the most visible and uplifting wildlife to share our surroundings. Their presence connects us to the seasons and reminds us that even the smallest patches of land can hold life. Faith grounds can provide safe nesting places, food through the year, and resting spots for birds moving across the landscape.

A good starting point for helping birds is to learn which types are already present. A simple walk, listening and watching at different times of year, will reveal which birds use lawns, hedges, trees and walls. Local birdwatching groups or Local Authority Biodiversity Officers can help to identify less obvious species and advise on grounds management.

The best habitats for birds are those that provide food and cover: native hedgerows; mature trees with hollows and dead wood; climbing plants such as ivy; and rough patches with bramble or elder. Keeping these features intact will support a wide range of resident and migratory birds. Where natural nesting sites are scarce, nest boxes can provide alternatives, but should not be placed on protected built heritage, such as older churches or ruins - if in doubt, always get advice first.

Focusing on particular birds can make efforts more effective. For example:

- **Swifts** need specially designed nest boxes or 'swift bricks' set high under eaves, with a clear flight path. See BirdWatch Ireland's Saving Swifts guide for details.
- **Swallows** build mud nests in barns, porches or sheds.
- **Barn Owls** can be supported with large, deep nest boxes on trees or in quiet buildings.
- **Kestrels** use open-fronted boxes on towers or trees near rough grassland.
- **House Martins** build mud nests under eaves. Artificial cups can also help, placed at least 2m high.

  See the Wildlife in Buildings guide to find out more.

  Information on nest boxes is available from BirdWatch Ireland.

> *“There is not an animal in the earth, nor a bird flying on its wings, but they are communities like you.”*
>
> Surah Al-An’am (6:38)

- **Feeding:** Feeders with sunflower hearts, peanuts or seed mixes can help birds through the winter. Place them in sheltered spots, and keep them clean to avoid disease.
- **Water:** A bird bath or shallow dish of fresh water is just as important as food. Keep topped up and clean.
- **Surveying:** Identification apps for your smartphone, such as Merlin or Warblr, can help you identify bird species based on birdsong and calls.

Take part in BirdWatch Ireland’s Irish Garden Bird Survey (December–February) to add to national data.

Further practical information, including hygiene tips, nest box designs and citizen science opportunities, is available from BirdWatch Ireland.

Barn Owl nest box

House Martin mud nest

Swift nest box installed at Kilkee.

Installing swift nest boxes on church building at Kilkee, Co Clare.

Swift

Bats

Bats are among the most fascinating, yet misunderstood animals in Ireland. All are insect-eaters, each one capable of catching thousands of insects on a single night. As well as having their own intrinsic value, bats play a vital role in keeping insect numbers in balance.

Bats usually roost in mature trees and caves, but as trees have become more scarce, many now use buildings. Old walls, towers, eaves and roofs often provide the crevices they need, with bats hiding behind felt, under tiles or within cavities. Faith buildings, especially older ones with crypts or steeples, can be important bat roosts.

All bats and their roosts are legally protected. It is an offence to disturb them or to damage a roost without a licence. Before any work is carried out to roofs, joints in stone walls or lighting, an ecologist must first check for bats. If bats are found, advice must be sought from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and sometimes a derogation licence will be required before the work proceeds.

Habitats for bats

Broadleaf woodland, mature trees, tree lines and hedgerows all provide rich feeding grounds and safe corridors for bats. Oak and ash trees are particularly valuable as they support large numbers of insects and, as they age, develop the cracks and hollows that bats can use for shelter. Retaining these features is one of the simplest ways to support local bat populations.

Bats and lighting

Artificial lighting can pose a serious barrier for bats. Bright lights delay bats leaving roosts, block flight paths, and reduce feeding opportunities. Lighting should be kept to a minimum, with timers or sensors used so it only comes on when necessary. Warm-white or red-toned LEDs (2700K or lower) are less disruptive. Direct lights downwards, shield beams, and avoid illumination near roosts, waterways or tree lines. Where possible, leave these areas unlit.

Leisler's bat. The old Church of Ireland church at Tallow, Co. Waterford, is protected as it contains a nursery roost of Leisler's bats.

Making faith grounds bat friendly

Local bat groups, National Parks and Wildlife Service rangers or Local Authority Biodiversity Officers can advise on the presence of bats. Simple dusk watches or using a bat detector (an audio device that picks up the sounds bats make, allowing you to identify species) can reveal where bats are roosting or feeding. If building works are planned, a professional bat survey is essential.

Where natural roosts are scarce, bat boxes may be recommended. These should be installed in suitable feeding areas, at least 4m above ground on trees or buildings, facing south or south-east and sheltered from wind. Woodcrete boxes are most effective outdoors. Bat boxes should not be placed on protected structures or monuments.

Community engagement also helps. Organising a bat walk with an expert can raise public awareness and explain that bats are harmless neighbours worth protecting.

Bat Conservation Ireland offers bat walks and useful resources, including a guide on how to build your own bat box. They have also developed a booklet and videos on Gardening for Bats.

Common Pipistrelle

Bat boxes were placed on local trees as part of the Clare Return to Nature Church project.

> *Nature is not a resource to be exploited, but a trust to be protected."*
>
> Al-Mizan- A Covenant for the Earth

Did you know?

The Lesser Horseshoe Bat was known as the 'bat of the aristocracy' as it often roosts in old historic ruins. It is the only bat species in Ireland that hangs upside down, with its wings wrapped around its body.

Examples and Inspiration

Across Ireland, faith communities are finding practical and creative ways to care for nature on their grounds. The examples that follow show how faith communities of all traditions are linking spiritual values with biodiversity action – from planting orchards to regenerating traditional meadows or developing new woodland. Each project is rooted in its own faith context, but all share a common theme: small groups working together can create lasting benefits for both wildlife and people.

Sunyata Buddhist Centre, Co Clare

> Appreciation and care for nature is embedded in Buddhist practice, and one of the beliefs upheld by Buddhist communities is to refrain from intentionally harming or taking the life of any living being. The Buddha also recommended the cultivation of kindness, love and compassion for all beings.

Sunyata Buddhist Centre is nestled in the hills of East Clare, and covers 13 acres, with approximately 10 of these given over to nature, comprising gardens, woodlands, ponds, a stream and waterfall, and large areas of natural regeneration. Around three acres are mixed broadleaf woodland, which was planted about 25 years ago, and is managed sustainably for both contemplation and biodiversity. The woodland is an example of planned rewilding and regeneration, as it was formerly farmland, but is now a thriving ecosystem that includes a wide variety of bird life, red squirrels, badgers, hedgehogs, foxes and pine martens.

Other parts of the site are in various stages of natural rewilding and regeneration, and are being managed largely through non-intervention, with bramble, nettles, wildflowers and young native trees providing habitat and shelter for birds and a huge variety of other wildlife. A small vegetable garden, ponds and grassland, are managed naturally, with only simple paths cut for walking. These areas support pollinators and a diversity of native plants.

Since the Buddhist core beliefs do not allow the intentional harming of living beings, there are many bird nests and even wild bees living in one property. Even spiders and other bugs are caught and released from buildings rather than harmed. One of the aims of the site is to be an embodiment of the potential for all beings to live in harmony.

– Paul McNamee, Forest Manager

Red squirrels occupy the rewilded woodlands at Sunyata Buddhist centre.

“Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, So with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings: radiating kindness over the entire world – Spreading upwards to the skies, downwards to the depths, outwards and unbounded ”

Metta Sutta

Return to Nature Clare Church Biodiversity Project

The 'Return to Nature Clare Church Biodiversity Project' came about in 2023 after the Irish Bishops' Conference agreed on the target that parishes would return 30% of church grounds to nature by 2030. The initiative piloted 10 parishes, encompassing 12 Roman Catholic churches and community groups, initially partnering with the Local Authority Biodiversity Officer, the Diocese of Killaloe and the Laudato Sí Working Group. The number of participating churches increased in 2024, and now includes 23 churches across Clare, including two Church of Ireland churches.

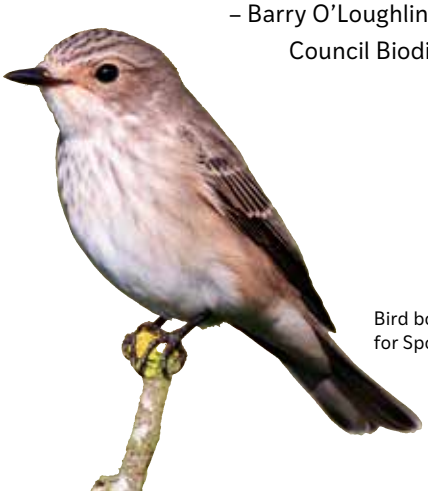
Actions so far have included installing nest boxes for Barn Owl and Swift, developing and implementing a pollinator plan for each churchyard, erecting bat boxes on trees, installing bird feeders, planting pollinator-friendly fruit trees of local provenance, planting organic bulbs, erecting bird boxes for Robin and Spotted Flycatcher, and creating signage to communicate the project to the congregation.

The project aims to inform and upskilll local communities and priests, with biodiversity workshops and demonstrations organised by Clare County Council's Biodiversity Officer, working in collaboration with bat, bird, pollinator and botany experts, and working closely with BirdWatch Ireland, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Ennis Men's Shed, the Irish Seed Savers Association, the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, Tidy Towns groups, local farmers, and local schools.


Clarecastle Church meadow

There were great results from long-flowering meadows, where a rich array of wildflowers appeared, including marsh orchid and common spotted orchid, at church grounds in Doonbeg, Inagh, Kilmaley and Clarecastle. Self-heal, meadow thistle, ox-eye daisy, bird's-foot trefoil, dandelion, hawksbeard, cuckoo flower, meadowsweet and tormentil bring colour and life to the church grounds and provide nectar and pollen sources for pollinators.

– Barry O'Loughlin, Clare County Council Biodiversity Officer


Bird boxes were erected for Spotted Flycatcher

Carrigaline Union of Parishes, Co Cork

Carrigaline Union of Parishes is in the Church of Ireland Diocese of Cork, Cloyne and Ross. One of the churches, St Mary's Church Carrigaline, is a great example of managing grounds for pollinators and biodiversity. The parish group mapped out the church grounds and rectory garden using the Faith Communities: Actions for Pollinators guidelines.

They stopped using pesticides completely, let key areas grow wild, and reduced strimming in the graveyard. Native flowers like knapweed, wood speedwell, scarlet pimpernel, cowslips, lesser celandine, primroses, bluebells, and other plants began to appear in the grassy areas. They also established areas where pollinator-friendly flowers such as red campion and ox-eye daisies grow; and planted oak trees and a heritage orchard. There is plenty of flowering bramble and ivy, providing an important food source for many pollinators, such as bumblebees and hoverflies, and berries for birds.

Due to the age of the church and with a historic graveyard (200 and 300 years old), they have 90m of dry-stone walls, providing habitat for insects, and where ferns, mosses and lichens thrive. They have earth banks and bare soil, providing habitats for solitary bees. Foxes, rabbits and hedgehogs have all been seen in the graveyard, and the areas they left with log piles, leaf and grass piles give some cover to such creatures.

Carrigaline Union of Parishes has been accredited by Eco-Congregation Ireland since 2013. Eco-Congregation Ireland is an initiative that encourages churches of all denominations to take an environmental approach to worship, lifestyle, property and finance management, community outreach and contact with the developing world.

– John Andrew, member of the Parish Eco Group for Carrigaline Union of Parishes

EcoSikh Ireland - Guru Nanak Sacred Forest, Templeglantine, Co Limerick

In 2022, a small rural village in Co. Limerick became home to Ireland's first Guru Nanak Sacred Forest. This is an environmental initiative to plant micro-forests by the Sikh community worldwide. It is a project where faith, history, and ecology converge.

The forest was planted on the grounds of Templeglantine National School, which has a unique connection to Sikh heritage: it was the school of Max Arthur MacAuliffe, the Irish scholar who first translated sections of the *Guru Granth Sahib* into English. To honour his legacy and that of Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism, the Sikh community in Ireland, led by EcoSikh Ireland, planted this micro-forest.

The project embodies the Sikh principle of sewa (selfless service) and the faith's reverence for nature, expressed in Guru Nanak's words: "Air is the Guru, Water the Father, and Earth the Great Mother."

Reforest Nation provided ecological expertise, using the Miyawaki method – planting over 1,150 native Irish trees in a dense, fast-growing forest. The planting day became a communal act of service and devotion: more than 100 volunteers, including members of the Sikh community, local residents, and schoolchildren, joined together to plant the sacred forest.

Faith shaped not only the project's purpose but also its social impact. The planting and subsequent inauguration were infused with prayers, food and music, and a celebration of shared values of environmental stewardship. The Sikh and Irish communities together dedicated the forest as a living symbol of harmony and respect for nature.

In Ireland, with its limited native forest cover, this project offers more than ecological value: it demonstrates how faith-based environmental action can inspire diverse communities to heal landscapes and strengthen bonds between people and the natural world.

–Satwinder Singh -
EcoSikh Ireland Chairperson

GOOD PRACTICE ESSENTIALS

Making faith grounds accessible

Making faith grounds more welcoming for wildlife can also make them more welcoming for people. Varied paths, quiet corners, seating and clear signs also improve access for wheelchair-users, older parishioners, and neuro-diverse visitors.

Accessible design does not mean heavy construction or potentially damaging interventions. A single firm path, wide enough for safe passage, with resting places at intervals, allows people of all abilities to enjoy the grounds without disturbing sensitive habitats. Benches or log seats placed at viewpoints can double as wildlife-watching spots.

Information also matters. A simple colour-coded map, or signs with clear symbols, can help all visitors find their way without relying on dense text. Setting aside a quiet zone at the edge of a meadow or woodland can provide calm for those who need it, while also creating a low-disturbance refuge for wildlife.

Further guidance is available from:

- The National Disability Authority – Accessible Heritage Sites
- Sport Ireland and the Irish Wheelchair Association – Great Outdoors Access Guidelines
- Department of Housing & NDA – Improving Accessibility of Historic Buildings and Places

See page 59 for links

Health and safety

Caring for biodiversity often involves simple, low-impact actions, but safety should always come first. Faith grounds can present particular risks, especially in older graveyards with unstable walls, leaning headstones or uneven ground.

Before starting work, walk the site and note any hazards. Mark or cordon off areas that may be unsafe, and seek professional advice where structural risks are identified. Volunteers should be briefed on safe practices, such as handling tools correctly, avoiding lone working in isolated areas, and using protective gloves when dealing with brambles or nettles.

Chemical use should be avoided, both for safety and biodiversity reasons. Where pesticides or herbicides are in use, be aware that storage and application carry legal duties under health and safety law.

For larger projects, particularly those involving contractors, the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 may require a formal risk assessment and method statement.

Small measures, such as providing hand-washing facilities, ensuring access to drinking water, and keeping a first-aid kit on site, all make biodiversity work safer and more enjoyable.

Spreading the word in the faith community and beyond

> Caring for biodiversity is not just about protecting nature – it's also about inspiring others to take part. Faith communities are well placed to lead by example, sharing the message of care for creation through worship, community action, and everyday choices. There are simple ways to connect faith and nature, and involve the wider community through events, volunteering, and communication. By spreading the word, every community can help nurture both faith and the natural world.

Celebrate key biodiversity dates

Integrate biodiversity into worship and reflection. Mark key dates that can frame prayer or outdoor gatherings in your grounds, such as:

- World Wetlands Day (February 2)
- Earth Hour, Earth Day (April 22)
- World Bee Day (May 20)
- Biodiversity Week (May)
- National Meadow Day (July)
- Heritage Week (August)
- Season of Creation (September 1 - October 4)

Make the grounds welcoming

Cut paths through meadow areas and cut margins along meadow edges to show they are cared for, and to encourage people to walk among wildflowers. Provide benches or create a simple outdoor sacred space where visitors can pause, pray, or enjoy nature quietly.

Creating a Biodiversity Walking Trail or Native Tree Trail are lovely ideas for larger grounds.

Host walks and talks

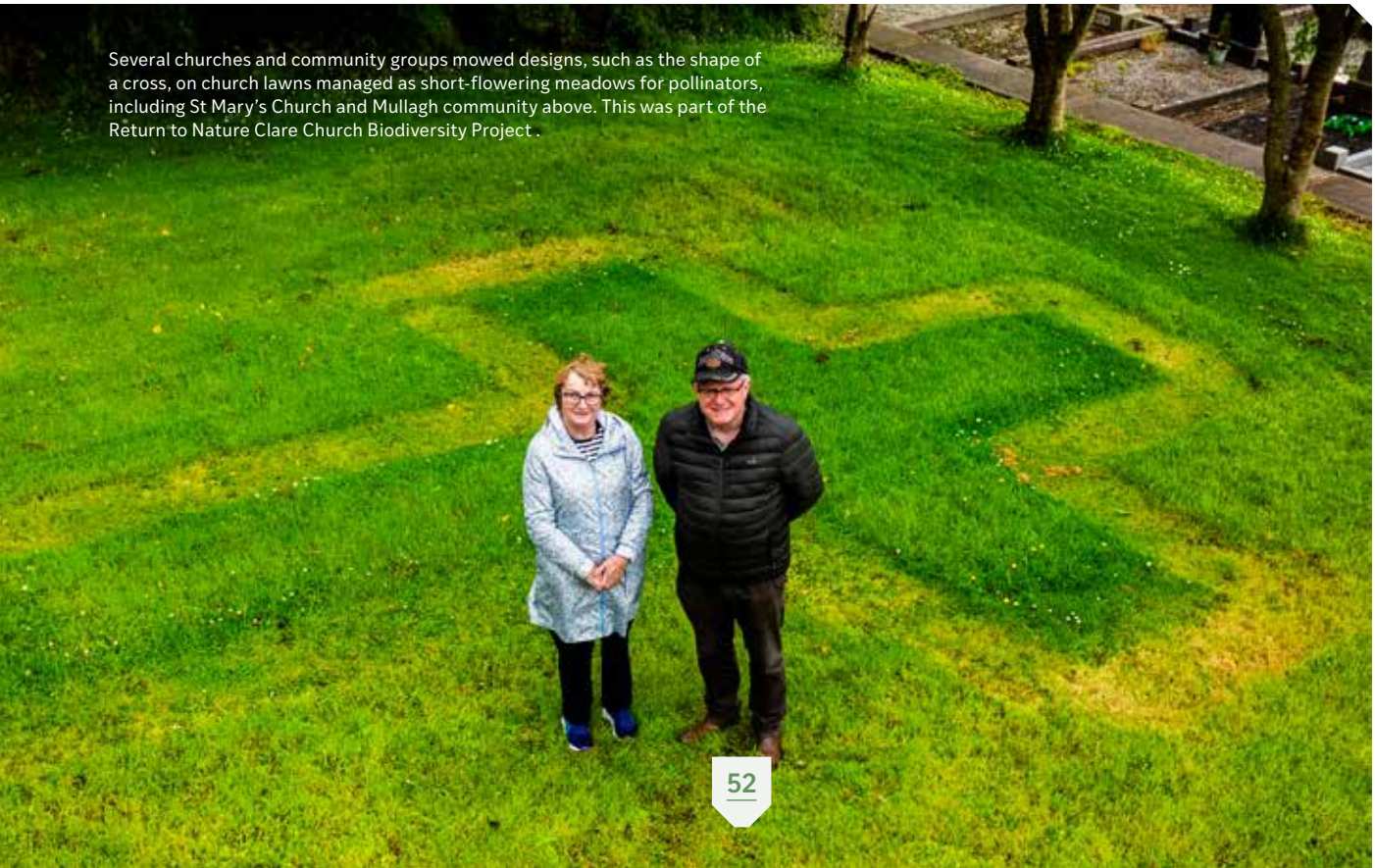
Invite experts or local groups to lead activities such as bat walks, birdwatching mornings, or wildflower identification sessions. Linking these to national events such as Biodiversity Week or Heritage Week can attract wider interest.

Organise volunteer days

A traditional meitheal - where many volunteers work together - can make tasks, such as weeding, planting or recording wildflowers, sociable and enjoyable. Families, schools and community groups can all be invited.

Use media to share progress

Using local radio, parish newsletters, social media and noticeboards are effective ways to explain what is happening. Take photographs of events and wildlife to create updates and encourage more people to get involved.



Several churches and community groups mowed designs, such as the shape of a cross, on church lawns managed as short-flowering meadows for pollinators, including St Mary's Church and Mullagh community above. This was part of the Return to Nature Clare Church Biodiversity Project .

Contribute to citizen science

Simple surveys such as Flower–Insect Timed Counts (FIT Counts) or bumblebee monitoring are accessible ways for volunteers to track change. Submitting results to the National Biodiversity Data Centre adds to the national picture.

Work with schools

Partner with local schools on simple actions, such as leaving grassy areas to flower or creating wildlife gardens. Use the *Junior All-Ireland Pollinator Plan* and the *How to Guide: Develop a Pollinator Plan for your school*. See pollinators.ie/schools/

Collaborate locally

Link with Tidy Towns groups, sports clubs and other community organisations. Joint projects spread knowledge and share effort.

Build skills

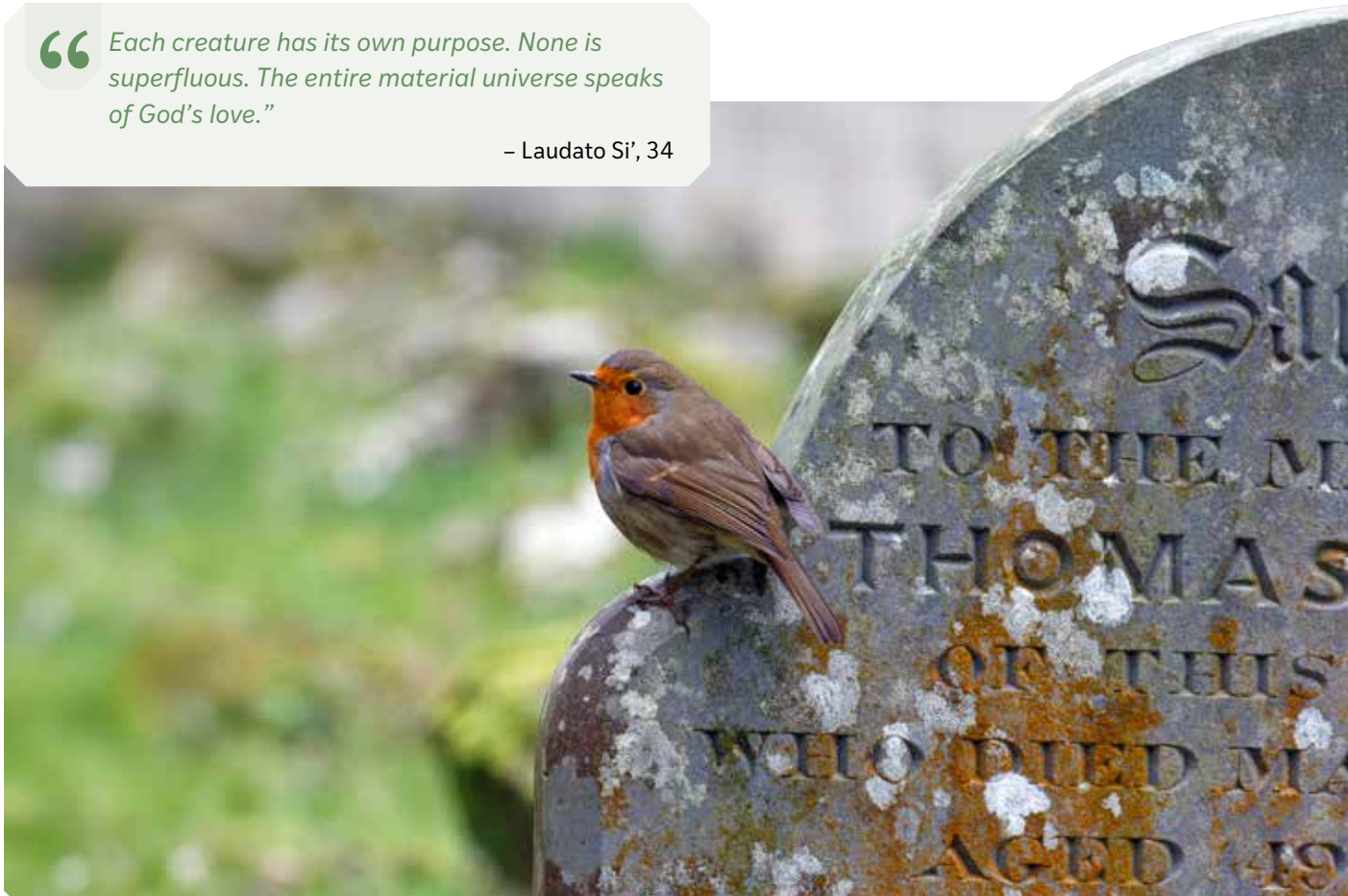
Provide training for biodiversity group members, faith leaders and groundskeepers. Topics might include pollinators, wildflower identification or gardening for biodiversity. See Funding and Training (page 57).

Explain with signage

Well-placed, accessible signs can tell the story of why areas are being managed for wildlife. Signage reassures visitors that the grounds are cared for, not neglected.

If a sign is not appropriate, a website can carry information, and sometimes subtle QR codes can be used on site to direct people to where further information is available.

> *Each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love."*
>
> – Laudato Si', 34



Reducing pesticide use

Pesticides are chemicals used to control pests of all types, and include insecticides, fungicides and herbicides. While their purpose is to target specific plants or animals, they also harm the wider web of life. Pesticides can kill, harm and disorientate pollinators, either through direct exposure or by poisoning their food. Insecticides kill beneficial insects such as bees. Herbicides remove wildflowers that pollinators rely on. Birds and mammals, such as Barn Owls or hedgehogs can be poisoned indirectly when they eat treated seeds or prey.

The best approach is to avoid pesticides altogether. Growing from seed, cuttings or divisions is a safe option and keeps grounds healthy for pollinators and other wildlife.

Avoid spraying around the base of trees. Mulching is a safe, sustainable, and effective option around young saplings.

Rodenticides

Rodenticides are poisons used against rats and mice. These toxins move up the food chain, killing birds of prey such as Barn Owl, Kestrel, Buzzard, Red Kite and Sparrowhawk, when they eat poisoned rodents. In Ireland, rodenticides are now recognised as a major cause of death for raptors.

The most effective alternatives are preventative: good waste management, secure food storage and regular building maintenance. Encouraging natural predators such as owls and kestrels also helps. If nest boxes are installed for these birds, it is vital to keep the area free from rodenticides. Where poisons cannot be avoided, follow the Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use (CRRU) Code of Best Practice to reduce risks.

Instead of using herbicides, you could try using a pressure cleaner on footpaths to remove algae and moss. However, pressure cleaners should never be used on gravestones or monuments as they can cause damage.

Managing without pesticides

Start by checking whether pesticides are currently used in the grounds, and question whether they are really needed. Chemicals may suppress plants seen as weeds, but they also harm the insects that depend on them. Weedkillers should never be used in historic burial grounds or graveyards.

Many plants often targeted as weeds, such as nettles, are important foodplants for butterfly caterpillars. Where control is needed, manage by hand before plants set seed. Tools such as hoes, weed brushes and weeding hooks are effective for paths, paving cracks and wall edges.

Mulching is a safe and effective option around young saplings. Using bark, wood chips, compost, cardboard or well-rotted manure suppresses weeds while improving soil as it breaks down. Never spray around the base of mature trees. In larger areas, mowing or strimming may be necessary. Leaving some patches uncut provides valuable habitat for insects. Scything is another option that is quieter and less disruptive than machines, and modern lightweight designs make it more accessible.

By avoiding chemicals and using simple methods, communities can maintain attractive, safe spaces, while supporting pollinators, birds and mammals.

For some pesticide alternatives, see pollinators.ie/pesticide-alternatives/

Note: Herbicides should still be used with care on invasive species where no better solution exists, for example, Japanese knotweed.

> *When God created the first human beings, God led them around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said: "See my works how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! Think of this and do not corrupt or destroy my world, for if you do so, there will be no one to put it back together."*
>
> – Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13

A compost heap can be used to provide mulch for around tree saplings.

Legal duties

In Ireland, a number of laws protect built, natural and cultural heritage, and these apply equally within faith grounds. Works that affect wildlife, archaeology or historic structures may need consent, licences or formal notification. Carrying out work without the right advice can lead to damage, and even to prosecution, fines, or a requirement to undo the changes at your own cost. The legislation outlined here is correct as of December 2025, but is provided for guidance only. Always consult the full statutes and seek advice from the relevant authority or a qualified professional before starting new projects.

National Monuments Acts 1930-2014

These Acts protect recorded monuments, archaeological sites and historic graveyards. It is an offence to interfere with a recorded monument without ministerial consent. Works in or near a protected site must be cleared with the National Monuments Service. Always assume ground disturbance in old graveyards may reveal burials or archaeology, and must therefore be avoided.

Wildlife Acts 1976–2023

The Wildlife Acts protect wild birds, mammals, plants and their habitats. It is illegal to disturb or destroy the nests and eggs of wild birds, or to cut hedges and vegetation during the nesting season (March 1 – August 31), except where exemptions apply (for example, road safety). Many species, such as bats, otters and badgers are strictly protected and licences are required from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) for any work that might disturb them.

European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011

These Regulations transpose the EU Birds and Habitats Directives into Irish law. They protect Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs), known collectively as Natura 2000 sites. Any works that could damage or disturb protected habitats or species within or near these sites require consent, mitigation or assessment. Under the Habitats Directive, projects that might affect a Natura 2000 site must undergo screening for Appropriate Assessment (AA). If likely significant effects cannot be ruled out, a full assessment is required before the project can proceed. Screening is carried out by the local planning authority in consultation with NPWS. Even small-scale works can trigger this requirement if they are close to or connected with a designated site (for example, via water).

Forestry Act 2014

In most cases, a Felling Licence is required to fell, uproot, cut, lop or top a tree. Exemptions apply in certain cases, such as trees within 30m of a house, in private gardens or orchards, or where there is an immediate safety risk. Before removing any mature trees, contact the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to confirm if a licence is required.

Planning and Development Acts

Faith buildings may be protected structures or lie within architectural conservation areas. Works that affect their character – such as external repairs, pointing, or installing signage or boxes — require consent from the local planning authority. Always consult the Local Authority Architectural Conservation Officer before starting work. Large-scale projects, or smaller projects with potential for significant environmental effects, may require Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) before permission is granted. Thresholds and requirements are set out in the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended). In practice, this is most relevant for new buildings, car parks or major landscaping, but advice should always be sought from the planning authority at an early stage.

Funding and training

Funding

Many funding opportunities are open to community groups working to protect biodiversity. Below are some of the organisations who may be able to provide funding. Not all schemes will apply to faith grounds, so always check the details carefully. Information is accurate as of August 2025, but you should confirm the latest updates on the funders' websites.

The Heritage Council	The Community Heritage Grant Scheme supports communities and NGOs working on natural, built or cultural heritage projects.
Local Authority Biodiversity Officers	Can provide small grants, advice, and links to training or citizen science projects.
Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO)	Funds community projects through the Community Water Development Fund and other small grants. Some schemes may be relevant to faith grounds.
Local Authority Community Grants	Support active community groups, sometimes including heritage and biodiversity projects. Availability varies by council.
Community Foundation Ireland	Funding to develop a Community Biodiversity Action Plan, working with an ecologist, followed by grants to implement priority actions.
Burrenbeo – Heritage Keepers	Place-based learning and funding to support natural, built and cultural heritage projects.

Training opportunities

There is a range of biodiversity training available around the country. Below are some providers.

National Biodiversity Data Centre	Free online courses on actions for biodiversity; and low-cost workshops on species identification, pollinators, and citizen science.
Local Authority Heritage and Biodiversity Officers	Can organise training for local groups, for example, in citizen science, pollinator and wildflower identification.
BirdWatch Ireland	Online and in-person training on bird identification, surveys, and conservation (often through local branches).
Bat Conservation Ireland	Courses on bat ecology, survey methods and conservation.
National and Local Events	Biodiversity Week (May) and Heritage Week (August) include many free training sessions, walks and talks.

Useful Contacts & Resources

Action for Biodiversity
Ireland's portal for Community Biodiversity Action Plans

All-Ireland Pollinator Plan
Faith Communities: Actions to help pollinators
How-to guide: Creating and Restoring Meadows in Local Communities and Gardens
How to guide: Hedgerows for Pollinators
How-to-guide: Traditional Orchards and Fruit Trees for Pollinators
Making car parks pollinator friendly

An Taisce
An Taisce's Pond Guides

Bat Conservation Ireland
Gardening for Bats

Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland

BirdWatch Ireland
Saving Swifts guide

Caring for God's Acre

Dark Sky Ireland
Environmentally Friendly Lighting Guide

Don't Mow Let It Grow

Eco Congregation

EcoSikh Ireland

Invasive Species

Irish Bishops Care for Creation

Irish Garden Birds

Irish Peatland Conservation Council

Irish Seed Savers Association

Irish Wheelchair Association
Great Outdoors Access Guidelines

Irish Wildlife Trust

National Biodiversity Data Centre
Record all types of biodiversity with the National Biodiversity Data Centre.
All-Ireland Bumblebee Monitoring Scheme
FIT counts
Actions for Pollinators mapping system
For online courses and workshops

National Built Heritage Service

National Disability Authority
Code of Practice on Accessible Heritage Sites
Improving the Accessibility of Historic Buildings and Places

National Monuments Service

National Parks and Wildlife Service

Native Woodland Trust

Rodenticides and wildlife

Seasons of Creation

Swift Conservation

The Heritage Council
Local Authority Biodiversity Action Plans
Biodiversity Officer programme
Heritage Officer programme
Gardening for Biodiversity guide
Guidance for the Care, Conservation and Recording of Historic Graveyards
Wildlife in Buildings guide

Tree Council of Ireland
Guide to 'The right tree, in the right place'
Tree Register of Ireland

Trócaire
Laudato-si

Vincent Wildlife Trust Ireland

Wildflowers of Ireland

Local Authority Biodiversity Officers & Heritage Officers

County	Biodiversity Officer	Heritage Officer
Carlow	Shane Casey scasey@carlowcoco.ie	Dr Eoin Sullivan esullivan@carlowcoco.ie
Cavan	In recruitment info@cavancoco.ie	Anne Marie Curley amcurley@cavancoco.ie
Clare	Barry O'Loughlin boloughlin@clarecoco.ie	Congella Maguire cmcguire@clarecoco.ie
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	Usna Keating usna_keating@corkcity.ie	
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Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown	Anne Murray annemurray@dlrcoco.ie	Deirdre Black dblack@dlrcoco.ie
	Martina O'Brien martinaobrien@dlrcoco.ie	
Fingal	Hans Visser hans.visser@fingal.ie	Christine Baker christine.baker@fingal.ie
	Lorraine Bull lorraine.Bull@fingal.ie	
Galway City	In recruitment CustomerService@galwaycity.ie	Jim Higgins jim.higgins@galwaycity.ie
Galway County	Rosina Joyce rjoyce@galwaycoco.ie	Marie Mannion mmannion@galwaycoco.ie
Kerry	Eleanor Turner eleanor.turner@kerrycoco.ie	Victoria McCarthy VMcCarthy@kerrycoco.ie
Kildare	Meabh Boylan mboylan@kildarecoco.ie	Dara Wyer dwyer@kildarecoco.ie

County	Biodiversity Officer	Heritage Officer
Kilkenny	Bernadette Moloney bernadette.moloney@kilkennycoco.ie	Regina Fitzpatrick regina.fitzpatrick@kilkennycoco.ie
Laois	Lisa Doyle ldoyle@laoiscoco.ie	Thomas Carolan tcarolan@laoiscoco.ie
Leitrim	Rebeccah Cogan rcogan@leitrimcoco.ie	Sarah Malone smalone@leitrimcoco.ie
Limerick	Sinead McDonnell sinead.mcdonnell@limerick.ie	Tom O'Neill heritage@limerick.ie
Longford	Adam Mulvihill amulvihill@longfordcoco.ie	Mairead Ní Chonghaile heritage@longfordcoco.ie
Louth	Helen Hanratty helen.hanratty@louthcoco.ie	Brendan McSherry brendan.mcsherry@louthcoco.ie
Mayo	Sheila Murphy sheilamurphy@MayoCoCo.ie	Deirdre Cunningham dcunningham@mayococo.ie
Meath	Ben Malone bmalone@meathcoco.ie	Loreto Guinan lguinan@meathcoco.ie
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Offaly	Ricky Whelan rwhelan@offalycoco.ie	Amanda Pedlow heritage@offalycoco.ie
Roscommon	Gerard Hannon ghannon@roscommoncoco.ie	Nollaig Feeney nollaig.feeney@roscommoncoco.ie
Sligo	Ruth Hanniffy rhanniffy@sligococo.ie	Siobhán Ryan sryan@sligococo.ie
South Dublin	In recruitment, info@sdublincoco.ie	Rosaleen Dwyer rdwyer@sdublincoco.ie
Tipperary	Anne Marie Fleming annmarie.fleming@tipperarycoco.ie	Róisín O'Grady roisin.ogrady@tipperarycoco.ie
Waterford	In recruitment contact@waterfordcouncil.ie	Bernadette Guest bguest@waterfordcouncil.ie
Westmeath	Christina Sweeney Christina.Sweeney@westmeathcoco.ie	Melanie McQuade melanie.mcquade@westmeathcoco.ie
Wexford	Claire Goodwin claire.goodwin@wexfordcoco.ie	Colm Moriarty colm.moriarty@wexfordcoco.ie
Wicklow	Hannah O'Kelly hokelly@wicklowcoco.ie	Deirdre Burns dburns@wicklowcoco.ie

Seasonal action plan

Blackthorn. New native hedgerows can be planted between October and April.

Early Bumblebee

Actions you can take any time

- Create a grass management plan for different areas, to include long- or short-flowering meadows.
- Leave wild areas (no maintenance needed).
- Review outdoor lighting and ensure it is bat-friendly.
- Make a log pile or compost heap in a quiet corner.
- Record the birds using your grounds. Note changes across the seasons.
- Keep feeders and bird baths topped up and clean.
- Record wildflowers in your meadow areas. Note species richness increases each year.
- Record notable trees (particularly old or tall trees) on your grounds on the Tree Register of Ireland.
- Retain old and veteran trees (especially yews) and dead wood, unless unsafe.
- Identify wet areas or suitable sites for a rainwater planter or water feature.
- Use only peat-free compost.
- Check land annually for invasive plants such as Japanese Knotweed, and treat appropriately.
- Agree a pesticide plan for your site, aiming to reduce or stop all chemical use.
- Raise awareness in the community about the impacts of pesticides and safe alternatives.

Spring

- Begin a 4-6 week grass-cutting rota for short-flowering meadows. Always remove cuttings.
- Keep a wide, uncut, unsprayed margin at the base of hedgerows - for wildflowers and bumblebees.
- Prepare bare soil, drilled wood or bee hotels for nesting solitary bees.
- Plant native hedgerows, trees or orchards (until April). Plant pollinator-friendly shrubs.
- Protect and enhance existing wetland areas. Add native moisture-loving plants.

Summer

- Continue short-flowering meadow management, cutting every 4-6 weeks.
- In long-flowering meadow areas, mow paths through meadows and around margins. Remove tall, fast-growing plants (such as dock, nettle, thistle, hogweed) if they threaten to dominate.
- Plant pollinator-friendly perennials and herbs.
- Plant autumn-flowering bulbs, such as autumn crocuses, in late summer or by early autumn.
- Survey birds and bats with expert support. Identify locations for nest or bat boxes.
- Host a guided bat walk with a local expert or your Local Authority Biodiversity Officer.
- Water young trees during dry spells and top up water features if needed.
- Hand-weed and mulch around trees instead of using weedkiller.
- Take part in citizen science, such as FIT Counts or the All-Ireland Bumblebee Monitoring Scheme.

Autumn

- Cut long-flowering meadows in September/ October; remove all cuttings.
- Allow ivy to flower and fruit (away from historic ruins) before trimming if necessary in spring.
- Turn compost and add mulch around young trees.
- Plant pollinator-friendly bulbs that will flower in spring.
- Plant new native hedgerows or native trees (between October and April). Source local plants. Avoid invasive or non-native species such as laurel and Leylandii.
- Plant an orchard using heritage apple, pear or plum varieties.
- Plant bird/pollinator-friendly trees and shrubs.

Winter

- Leave wild patches undisturbed for hibernating species.
- Make or refresh log piles.
- Avoid tidying fallen leaves too much or make a leaf litter pile.
- Install or clean nest boxes for birds (do not place on historic buildings).
- Having allowed native hedgerows to flower and fruit, you can now trim (outside the nesting season, March-August). Cut at most every two to three years and leave some sections uncut each year.
- Install bat boxes, with expert advice and permissions where required.
- Take part in BirdWatch Ireland's Garden Bird Survey.
- Provide bird seed and nuts in winter when natural supplies are scarce.

Every patch of land can shelter life. This guide from the Heritage Council shows how faith communities can turn their grounds – churchyards, mosques, temples, synagogues, and meeting houses – into places where nature and heritage thrive side by side.

Inside, you'll find straightforward, affordable actions that work: how to care for meadows, trees, walls, and water, while also respecting the archaeology, architecture, or the stories held in each place.

Whether you're a faith leader, volunteer, or community member, this is a practical handbook for restoring life to familiar ground - and seeing your community's heritage in a new light.

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

Sika deer at Glendalough.