

# Nature Hero Awards Guide Booklet 2025/26



**nature hero  
awards**  
Schools making a home for nature

In partnership with

**Glenveagh**  
Home of the new.



**Table of Contents**

**Introduction..... 3**

**Guidelines..... 4**

**What’s new this year?.....5**

**Summary of process..... 7**

**Video walkthrough guidelines.....8**

**Details of Actions.....9**

    Section I: Creating Plans.....9

    Section II: Creating Habitats..... 10

    Section III: Creating Heroes..... 20

**Prohibited:.....23**



## **Introduction**

The Nature Hero Awards is Ireland's largest outdoor learning programme across the education sector open to all pre, primary, secondary and homeschools\* in the Republic of Ireland.

To achieve a Nature Hero Award is a mark of excellence for a school, recognising exceptional work by students, staff and the entire school community to help biodiversity and strengthen our relationship with nature. It is delivered by Biodiversity in Schools in partnership with Glenveagh Homes.

It is mainly an award of participation, with three levels of achievement available including Bronze Badger, Silver Stag and Golden Eagle, each celebrated with a wooden plaque of varying size; all levels recognise excellent work done for nature. The aim of the programme is to help your school at least maintain your level, gradually achieve a higher level of award from year-to-year, and eventually maintain the highest standard.

As in previous years, there are also prizes available for a select number of schools; details are in 'What's new this year?'

In addition to this booklet you will find more information here:

[www.biodiversityinschools.com](http://www.biodiversityinschools.com)

[www.biodiversityinschools.com/nature-hero-awards](http://www.biodiversityinschools.com/nature-hero-awards)

## Guidelines

- The programme consists of many actions aimed at benefitting biodiversity, while also increasing student knowledge of, and interaction with, nature. Actions are grouped into sections: Creating Plans, Habitats and Heroes.
- All actions should have strong student involvement as far as possible - this will look different for every school. Just remember, this isn't a to-do list for the caretaker!
- The main focus of the programme is on participation and incremental improvements - Rome wasn't built in a day, and a forest doesn't grow in a year!
- If you complete a large number of actions to a high standard, you may qualify for one of the following levels: Bronze Badger, Silver Stag or Golden Eagle. Remember, a Bronze Badger is still a mark of excellence, and an achievement in its own right and you should be extremely proud.
- You can work towards an award over multiple years, and enter multiple years in a row - we actually encourage this, as working up to an award over a longer time may be more sustainable for you.
- Overall, we want this programme to be a fun, simple, helpful and structured way to boost biodiversity and connect your students to nature. It may take time to move through the levels but we're here to help every step of the way. Prizes are just a fun bonus and please remember not everyone can receive a prize - it's about taking part!
- Please see our website for T&Cs.


## **What's new this year?**

- ★ **New, easier submission:** At the end of year, you will submit the new Submission Form and the new Video Walkthrough. This greatly reduces the written requirements and the need for photos. The Submission Form is a slideshow format (Google Slides and Powerpoint are both available) - this can also be printed for your own use. The video requirements are detailed below. Both the Form and Video should be emailed together (video entries can also be sent via Whatsapp, to 085 268 4762). Anyone experiencing technical difficulties can get assistance and every effort will be made to help you get your entry in successfully. [natureheroawards@biodiversityinschools.com](mailto:natureheroawards@biodiversityinschools.com)
- ★ **Student involvement:** This year we want to focus on young people engaging meaningfully with nature, to increase their knowledge of and relationships with the natural world. As such we have incorporated student engagement into every action for biodiversity, rather than keeping it separated under 'Ecoliteracy'. This means students should be involved as much as possible in every action, and also gain relevant knowledge about the natural world. This might involve bird identification & watching to connect with bird boxes, or a project to count plant species in a no-mow meadow.
- ★ **Later deadline:** Based on feedback and conversations with participants, we have hugely extended the deadline for final submissions, an extra 8 weeks! The first and recommended deadline for all participants is **30th April 2026**. The final deadline will be **29th May 2026**. We still recommend the earlier date so technical issues can be resolved prior to the school summer holidays.
- ★ **Results will be announced in September** in the following school year. For this reason, you may want to select students who are not in their final year at your

school to be core participants. After results, the programme will immediately relaunch.

★ **Multiple prizes:** This year the overall prize fund of €10,000 has been divided up, to allow more schools to benefit from the fund. These will be won by outstanding schools\*. The prizes, which are all to fund biodiversity improvements, include:

- Overall National Winner - €5,000
- Best Preschool - €1,000
- Best Primary School - €1,000
- Best Secondary School - €1,000
- Spot prizes of €250 x8 for particularly good individual projects

★ **Training webinars:** A series of webinars will be held on topics such as: preparing for winter; native and non-native trees; how to make a wildlife pond. A full schedule of these will be announced via email and our website. 

\*Main prize not available to homeschools. See Terms and Conditions on our website.

## Summary of the NHA programme



Register your school

September 2025



Complete your actions

Sept to April

### Creating Plans

Complete all.

1. School habitat map (20pts)

### Creating Habitats

Complete at least 6 of 12.

1. Native woodlands (10pts)
2. Native hedgerows (10pts)
3. No-mow meadows (10pts)
4. Rewilding (5pts)
5. Water worlds (10pts)
6. Bird boxes (5pts)
7. Bird care stations (5pts)
8. Bat boxes (5pts)
9. Dead hedges (5pts)
10. Clever use of space (5pts)
11. Bug hotels (5pts)
12. Bee homes (5pts)

### Creating Heroes

Complete at least 1, 2 & 3.

1. Outdoor learning space (10pts)
2. Indoor learning (10pts)
3. Communication (10pts)
4. Community (5pts)
5. Other actions (10pts)



Submit your form & video

Closing dates:

Early bird 30<sup>th</sup> April 2026

Final deadline 29<sup>th</sup> May 2026



Results announced

September 2026

Awards immediately reopen.

## **Video walkthrough guidelines**

Your video is the main visual document we will have to assess your work. It is designed to replace cumbersome photo submissions. It should be as short and as simple as possible to save yourself time. There's no need to stress - it's as simple as taking a Whatsapp video of your garden work to send to anyone you know. We're not giving out Oscars! However, please adhere to the following guidelines:

- The video will be taken with a reasonably good camera phone, walking through the school / grounds, stopping to clearly show each project, with simple narration\* where needed. Please ensure to clearly show the full scope of your projects, e.g. a full overview of a no-mow meadow, bird boxes and feeders, etc.
- Children (or adults) do not need to be in the video. If including them, please ensure you have the full permission of their guardians.
- Ideally it will be single shot, without cuts or edits (these may be necessary in cases where projects are very spaced out across a large school grounds, etc.).
- There should be no visual effects, video filters, music or sound editing on the video. Remember, save yourself time, keep it simple.
- There should be no photos, slideshows or video montages included.
- There should be no AI generated content.
- The video will be as short as possible to convey your work; ideally 5-10 minutes in total.
- In short - **keep it clear and simple!**

\*Is féidir an scéal a insint i nGaeilge, ach beidh gá le haistriúchán Béarla leis ar mhaithe le hinrochtaineacht fhoireann mholtóireachta NHA.  
Narration can be in any Irish, but will need to be accompanied by English translation for accessibility of the NHA judging team.

## Details of Actions

**Note:** *All actions MUST involve students, as much as practically possible, and they should learn about the habitats and species being aided, thereby increasing their ecoliteracy. Can they be involved in building or painting a bird box? Can they help to dig holes for trees, or plant seeds to help pollinators? When working on ecoliteracy, ideally you would work outdoors e.g. doing a bug hunt and plant count in your no-mow area. For younger learners, you can also use a Nature Table as a focal point for nature-related learning throughout the year.*

## Section I: Creating Plans

- 1. Creation of a school map and a team of Nature Heroes (required; 20pts).** Students should create a map of the school grounds, and be active participants in deciding what could be done and where. Identify what you have before you start and identify where to focus your efforts. Include what nature you already have e.g. trees, flowers, hedgerow, etc. This is called habitat mapping and will guide where to focus your efforts. Please note that a screenshot from Google Maps is not a habitat map.
- 2. Decide what actions to take & create a schedule.** Using the map you made, make decisions about what action can be carried out and where. Are there areas that would be ideal to allow a rewild/ no-mow area? Is there a wet area that would be ideal for a wetland? Where could an outdoor learning area go? You might aim to have bird boxes installed in the first week of October, trees planted by November, etc., as well as a schedule of regular tasks related to the school garden. You don't need to submit this action plan; it is just for your own guidance. See the 'Action Planner' in the Submission Form for a simple outline plan.
- 3. Keep a record.** Don't forget anything you have done! Take some photos as you go for your own interest and keep notes so that you don't forget all your hard work by the time you come to fill out the submission form. Then take a single video showcasing all your work, to be included in the final submission (see above).

## Section II: Creating Habitats

### 1. Native Woodlands (10 pts)

Ireland was once almost entirely covered in native woodland - now that is down to less than 2% of the country's area. Needless to say, this situation is very bad for our native trees, and all the species that depend on them to survive.

Retain old trees, and plant new trees individually or a group to create a mini woodland habitat. Only choose native Irish species for planting. Schools with large areas need to be ambitious here (if space is an issue consider a planting project off the school grounds with the local community).

Remember that an old tree has many more nooks and crannies for wildlife to live in, and has built up a community of species living on (and within) it, making it far more important to wildlife than young trees - both are needed in a healthy woodland. This can be a reason to retain a very old but non-native tree.

Please see below for a list of native Irish tree and shrub species from the [Tree Council of Ireland](#). **Note that beech and sycamore are not native**, even though they are common - as such they have much less benefit for our wildlife, and in some cases may even be harmful, compared to our own native trees. **It is also important to source trees from Irish stock, grown in Ireland**, as imported trees and wood products have introduced several tree diseases to this island in recent decades (e.g. Ash Dieback).



*Old trees house rich communities of animals, plants and fungi in their roots and branches; newly established woods also have many benefits, and if stewarded carefully will become the complex woodland habitats of the future.*



### **Native trees and shrubs:**

ALDER - *Alnus glutinosa*  
ARBUTUS - *Arbutus unedo*  
ASH - *Fraxinus excelsior*  
ASPEN - *Populus tremula*  
BLACKTHORN - *Prunus spinosa*

BIRCH  
-DOWNY - *Betula pubescens*  
-SILVER - *Betula pendula*

CHERRY  
-BIRD - *Prunus padus*  
-WILD - *Prunus avium*

CRAB APPLE - *Malus sylvestris*  
ELDER - *Sambucus nigra*  
GUELDER ROSE - *Viburnum opulus*  
HAWTHORN - *Crataegus monogyna*  
HAZEL - *Corylus avellana*

HOLLY - *Ilex aquifolium*  
JUNIPER - *Juniperus communis*  
  
OAK  
-PEDUNCULATE - *Quercus robur*  
-SESSILE - *Quercus petraea*

ROWAN (MOUNTAIN ASH) - *Sorbus aucuparia*  
SCOTS PINE - *Pinus sylvestris*  
SPINDLE - *Euonymus europaeus*  
WHITEBEAM - Other *Sorbus* species

WILLOW  
-EARED - *Salix aurita*  
-GOAT (PUSSY) - *Salix caprea*  
-GREY - *Salix cinerea*  
-WHITE - *Salix alba*

WYCH ELM - *Ulmus glabra*  
YEW - *Taxus baccata*

### **Common non-native species (should not be planted in a native woodland):**

BEECH - *Fagus sylvatica*  
SYCAMORE (invasive) - *Acer pseudoplatanus*  
HORSE CHESTNUT - *Aesculus hippocastanum*  
MAPLE - Other *Acer* species  
LAUREL - any of several species  
CHERRY LAUREL (invasive) - *Prunus laurocerasus* / *rotunifolia*

Watch out for our **webinar** on native woodlands and hedgerows! 

## 2. Native Hedgerows (10 pts)

Ireland has a huge network of semi-natural habitat in the form of hedgerows, much of which has existed for hundreds of years. These hold a mix of species from many natural habitats, feeding and sheltering many animals, as well as acting as corridors for wildlife such as rabbits and hedgehogs, and even birds and bats which can use them to navigate in the landscape. A mature hedgerow habitat has a diversity of large and small tree species (not just hawthorn!), along with annual flowering plants, ferns and even fungi and mosses, where conditions are right.

Retain established hedgerow, and with expert advice, see if there are parts that might be improved (e.g. by replacing non-native species with native ones). Remember that cutting hedges is banned from March to August in Ireland - this is to allow nesting birds some time to complete their life cycles, as well as letting the bushes flower and set fruit - feeding the birds, and completing *their own* life cycles!

Plant native woody shrubs and small trees in double or staggered rows to establish a new hedgerow habitat - there are several methods available. Even a single line of willows, as below, is a start! Those with a large area need to be extra ambitious here. Please note non-native species do not count (see above for the list of native trees and shrubs). If space is an issue consider a planting project off the school grounds with the local community.

Recommended species for hedgerow habitat at school: Hawthorn, Hazel, Holly, Honeysuckle, Guelder Rose, Willow - but almost any of our native species will be beneficial.



First picture from [Flickr](#) by Mark Gunn, usage under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

### 3. No-mow Meadows (10 pts)

Grassland habitats are highly endangered in Ireland, pushing the species that depend on them nearer to extinction in this country. Dedicate a grassy area that will not be cut for at least a month, but ideally much longer (the longer between cuttings, the more plants can flower and the more benefit to wildlife). It could be as little as a few square metres - or as much as the whole school! Just remember that grasslands need to be managed to stay as grasslands. There are many ways to do this - cutting different areas of the ground on different weeks or months, cordoning off one area not to cut for 3-6 months, etc. The All Ireland Pollinator Plan has lots of advice and ideas for this.

Consider letting any and all grass areas grow without cutting over holidays – especially the summer! (Remember in practical terms to only let an area grow as wild as your caretaker can later manage with the equipment available.)

See the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan for excellent how-to guides:

[All-Ireland Pollinator Plan: Resources](#)



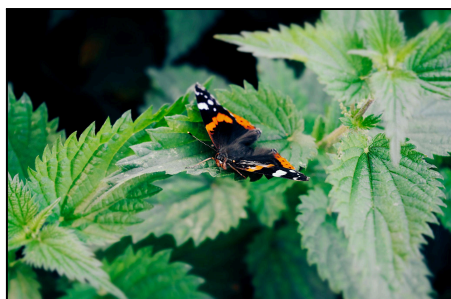
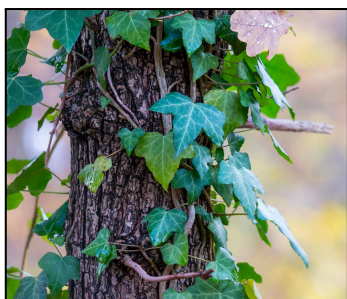
*This school pitch in Galway is not cut from mid-May until the end of August; a local farmer helps with the work. No herbicides or fertilisers are used.*




#### **4. ReWilding (5 pts)**

Some of the best plants come completely free without even trying! Often these are called 'weeds', but they are very important species for biodiversity - botanically there is no such thing as a 'weed'! Here are some impactful ways to incorporate often overlooked, native plants into your school grounds:

- Not everyone likes **nettles** but they are the nursery plant for many Irish butterflies. No nettles, no butterflies! Allow an area of nettles to grow on the school grounds.
- While often mistakenly cut back on school grounds, wild **ivy** is actually a superhero plant for biodiversity. It provides habitats for insects and birds (even smaller bats), opens its flowers in autumn for hungry bees without other sources of food, and grows berries in winter for peckish wildlife. Allow ivy to flourish in areas around the school. It is a myth that ivy kills trees - in fact it very much likes them alive, clinging to the outside of the bark as a natural climbing frame so it can be higher up when it flowers.
- Also reconsider other species such as **bramble, thistles and dandelions** - the birds and insects will thank you for it.



#### **5. Water Worlds (10pts)**

This action includes wet areas of all kinds. No school garden is complete without an area for frogs and their friends! Find a method that works for your school to create a wet area. It could be a damp, boggy area, a micro-pond as small as a sink, a rainwater planter, or even a large wildlife pond secured with fences. We'll be holding a webinar with participants and experts to explore options and learn from what has worked for other schools . There is a wet area to suit **every** school - it may just require a bit of thought and creativity to come up with the right one. See below for guides to making them.

Make sure to include a way for animals that might fall in to escape from your pond, such as a log; ideally include different depths in the design, and submerged water plants to help with oxygenation (for larger ponds). Clean stones and gravel are also very important as microhabitats for pond insects, such as baby dragonflies.

A small amount of leafy debris is normal for ponds, but do not let grass clippings or fertiliser to enter - grass should be taken out immediately before it begins to rot.

Rainwater planters are an increasingly popular option, especially in tight spaces - suitable for woodwork/ engineering projects. See the linked guides to building them below; some commercial options are also available.



Mini and larger ponds can all be beneficial for wildlife; a guide to building a full pond is available [here](#).



Rainwater planters are increasingly popular options to reduce flooding in the school ground, especially in urban areas. Guides to building them are available from these links:

[Make a Pollinator-friendly Rainwater Planter | All-Ireland Pollinator Plan](#)  
[A how-to-guide for Rainwater Planters | Dublin City Council](#)



## **6. Bird boxes (5 pts)**

Provide additional habitat for birds who are nesting. This can be as traditional wooden nest boxes, but also some birds like robins will nest in almost anything, so get creative - just make sure it is strong enough to hold the bird and her eggs securely!

Different types of boxes will suit different birds, so add a variety where possible. Some are open at the front, others have small or large circular entrance holes. Some schools even have swift, house martin and owl boxes! Follow the instructions on the box or plans, and if purchasing only buy FSC, sustainably made boxes. In your video submission, please show all bird boxes you have installed.



Remember that some birds will always shun man-made boxes for natural options - see the notes on retaining old trees and established hedgerows above for even more impactful bird nesting habitat.

## **7. Bird care stations (5 pts)**

You can help to look after your local birds by providing food such as seeds and a drinking water bath throughout the entire year, but particularly in winter. Care stations should be checked and topped up regularly - a rota can be drawn up for maintaining this (cleaning may need to be done from time to time).



Even a water bath by itself will attract many birds, as accessible sources of drinking water for small birds can be very scarce. A care station should have at least 1 bird bath per 5 feeders (feeding only dry food without a source of water just means birds have to fly further to find water after coming to your feeder).

### 8. **Bat boxes (5 pts)**

Bats are an often-overlooked part of biodiversity. Our bats, all protected in law, are important for naturally controlling insect populations - especially midges! More closely related to hedgehogs than any rodent, they are important members of our community in their own right, with few of the large caves or large old trees remaining in Ireland, often using our old buildings. See [Bat Conservation Ireland](#) for more information.

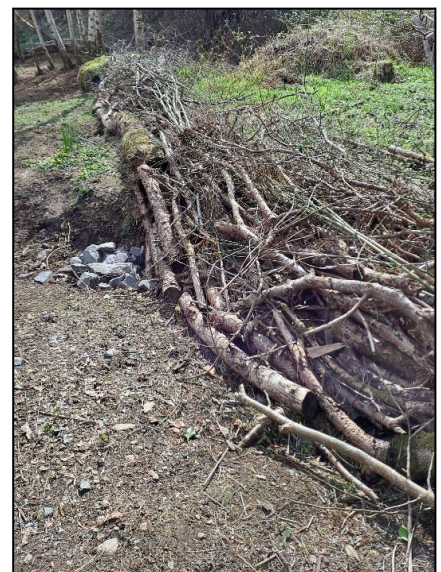
You can place bat boxes around the school on buildings and trees to help these flying mammals, away from bright lights. Follow the instructions on the box and if purchasing, buy only FSC, sustainably made boxes. See the links below for plans on how to build your own box.



[Making a bat box | from Bird Watch Ireland](#)  
[Creating Roosts - Bat Boxes | from Bat Conservation Ireland](#)

### 9. **Dead hedges (5 pts)**

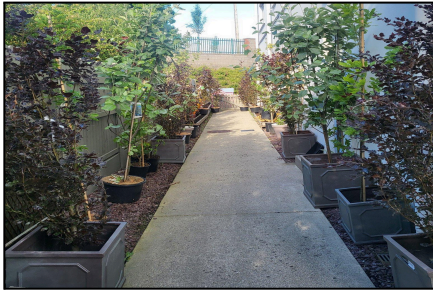
We often forget about the circle of life when it comes to nature, tidying away the dead stuff to make way for new stuff. However, this is a massive lost opportunity. For example, dead hedges are a great way to provide habitat for a wide range of plants and animals, from bugs to birds and hedgehogs and even fungi, with very little maintenance compared to living hedges. It is also a good way to use branch cuttings on-site for the benefit of your local wildlife. In a nutshell you're building and weaving a hedge from dead materials. This also applies to similar features such as log piles, leaf mould piles, rock piles.





### 10. Clever use of limited space (5 pts)

This is especially applicable to schools in urban areas, or any with a small outdoor area. You may have to do a little extra work to create space for nature, but it absolutely can be done. See below for just a few examples of creative uses of ‘hard’ or otherwise unused space. It’s also important to think about the vertical space you have available.



*A mini woodland in pots.*



*Growing herbs and flowers without green space.*

### 11. Bug hotels (5 pts)

These are a very popular feature of school grounds, from ‘Air Bee’n’Bees’ to ‘Bugingham Palaces’. They are a concerted effort to build a tidy habitat out of all the messy stuff that creepy crawlies like. A common sight is a pallet tower crammed full of a diversity of materials from straw to rocks, logs to bamboo. They can be as simple or as fancy as you like. They will provide homes for an array for bugs from ladybirds to woodlice, earwigs to centipedes (and yes, also bees). Unlike our own preferences for a hotel room, they like it dark and damp. Remember to always keep the materials topped up, and avoid using plastic.



### 12. Bee homes (5 pts)

While bee keepers look after honey bees in hives of thousands, most bee species do not build big hives, and many don’t live with their own kind at all, but are solitary bees.

The most effective method to help solitary bees in Ireland is to create a bee bank - essentially a mound of dry soil/sand in a sunny spot for the bees to burrow and lay their



eggs. For these and other strategies, see the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan's booklet [Creating wild pollinator nesting habitat](#).

It is essential if you are providing shelter for bees to also provide food (refer to 'No-Mow Meadows' and 'ReWilding' above). Please check out the top 10 list of recommended flowers to plant in school, including everything from herbs to spring bulbs:

[Top Ten pollinator-friendly plants for different situations](#)



### Section III: Creating Heroes

#### 1. Outdoor Learning Space (required; 10 pts)

Numerous studies from across the globe consistently show the benefits of outdoor time for children's development, especially for cognitive and physical development. You might use a polytunnel, a school garden, an 'official' outdoor classroom, a mini-woodland, your local park, even your hedges - all are valuable places for both structured and unstructured learning opportunities. Maybe you have no green space at school, but can avail of a local park, or take field trips - or maybe students are lucky enough that you are an entirely outdoor school - this is fantastic (but still rare in Ireland)!

Whatever your circumstances, it is important to dedicate outdoor time in a dedicated space for students - and you will feel the benefits yourself!



## 2. Indoor Learning (required; 10 pts)

This action is about the aspects of ecoliteracy that happen within the school building. A seasonally changing **nature table** is a great way to bring nature into the classroom - and once you establish it, generally children will bring in their own finds. You can add relevant photos and books or info cards. You might also start growing seeds that will later be planted out. With older students, dedicated space to show research into native Irish species, especially those found by students themselves, is a great way to highlight your biodiversity while practising composition and presentation skills for peer-to-peer learning. There are many ways to fulfill this action - most importantly it must be effective for students.



First picture from [Flickr](#) by Sunflower Lily, usage under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)

## 3. Communication (required; 10 pts)

This action refers to communicating your work with the whole school community extending to parents, guardians and neighbours.

It has happened time and again at schools and in communities - one person doing good work to try to improve their local environment finds it all destroyed by an innocent mistake, by someone who didn't know or appreciate what was trying to be achieved. There is no point doing this programme in secret! Spread the good word, and bring others on board - many hands make light work.

**Signage** around sites for no-mow and wild flowers can be particularly important within the school. If these can be **visible to the public** and school visitors, all the better. You might also dedicate a Nature Heroes notice board, share updates in a newsletter or on your website/social media page, or write an article for the local paper. Some schools in the past have even created poster campaigns, murals and podcasts! The list is almost endless.

#### **4. Community (5 pts)**

(This action will not apply to all schools. It is especially suitable for **smaller schools**, which may not have much area to work with on their own grounds.)

If you have **collaborated with local community groups**, individuals in the community, or just in a community space for the benefit of nature, you can share that with us here. Past entrants have donated and planted trees in local parks, worked with Tidy Towns and Men's Sheds groups (both on, and off, school grounds), and even helped to create biodiversity trails in their community.

#### **3. Other actions (10 pts)**

There are countless ways to help biodiversity in your local environment. If you have other actions you have taken, for nature education or directly for wildlife, you can tell us about them in this section. However the word count is limited, so you will have to be selective. If we really like your activities here, we may ask you later for photos or video, so do keep that in mind.

## Prohibited

Please note that use of **peat-based compost**, or use of **sprays such as herbicide or insecticide** are prohibited and will result in exclusion from the programme. Use of these products would undermine all your other biodiversity actions.

Use of **AI** to create images or answers is also not acceptable (and also creates largely irrelevant answers).

### Further explanation:

- Peat is extracted from bogs - this is direct destruction of one of our most important natural habitats. In addition to the loss of all the specially adapted flora and fauna that call bogs home, the effect on carbon emissions is enormous. See the [Peatlands and Climate Change Action Plan 2030](#) for more information.
- Those plants commonly sprayed as 'weeds' are almost always our native wild plants, which form the basis of the food chain and support a host of native insects, molluscs, arachnids, amphibians, in fact every major group of animals.
- Similarly, insecticides, and other pesticides, directly harm our biodiversity. Insects also feed a great many animals 'above' them in the food chain, as well as pollinating wild plants and crops, making them a crucial component of nature. In a time when [insect populations are collapsing](#), showing us the biodiversity crisis, use of products that kill them simply cannot be supported in a biodiversity programme.
- Use of generative AI, and in fact any energy-intensive technology, similarly does not support the overall aims of this programme. AI has well-documented [negative impacts on the environment](#), by steeply increasing demand for [electricity and water](#).