hay days

written by Andreas | 26 July, 2018



An important objective of the mowing and pruning management is establishing a parklike landscape with many transitions between grassland and wood. 26 May 2016.

These days, at the end of July, I have started to mow the vegetation around the house. Time and frequency of mowing depend mainly on the weather, the soil and on what you want to focus on. In my case one of the main objectives is enriching the vegetation with as many different spontaneous plant species as possible and then it is important to make the soil less fertile with your mowing management so that aggressive species have less opportunities.



Two days before, I had mowed this area, between the house and the vegetable garden and this day I gathered the hay on heaps. The small green shrub, *Cornus sanguinea*, and the Almond tree are spontaneous and were left in place. The green patch of the grass *Brachypodium phoenicoides* (behind them) was also spared as it stays remarkable green the whole summer and is also, for its height, an interesting structural element in the vegetation. 23 July 2018.

The best way to this is cutting the vegetation and taking away the hay frequently. But not all of the grassland area on the terrain has a deep, fertile soil so the mowing is usually restricted to areas around the house and around the ponds where the soil is deepest. On very fertile soils at least two mowing sessions are necessary but in my case, after many years of taking away the vegetal material, I usually mow once or even skip one or two years. The best time of the year is heavily dependent on the weather, but if you only mow once a year on a relatively poor soil it falls usually at the end of July and the beginning of August. Then the vegetation is not yet completely dry and dead and you can still take away some nutrients from the area.



The grass species *Bromus diandrus*

was heavily dominant in the
beginning as here in April 2007.

While mowing I try to avoid rare or important species to give them an extra chance of establishing. Also selecting or avoiding certain shrubs and trees is a very effective measure to steer the vegetation structure in the direction you want. My aim is to get a semi-open, semi-wild park landscape with many transitions among grassland, shrubs and wood. Apart from being pleasing to the eye, these kind of border structures are among the richest wildlife habitats. For example of the almost dozen orchid species, almost all of them grow in the half-shade of trees or shrubs.

After more than 10 years of applying this kind of management I can say that the results are important. There has been a clear shift in the vegetation with a higher variety of species and a more complex vegetation structure.



After several years of mowing, the quite ornamental grass *Phleum phleoides* seems to have replaced *Bromus diandrus.* 20 June 2016

Aggressive species, especially the grass species *Bromus diandrus*, have diminished, the vegetation is more open and gives more opportunities for delicate species. Very conspicuous is now the presence of species like *Scabiosa columbaria* and *Orlaya grandiflora* which attract loads of butterflies and other insects for weeks on end. In the undergrowth *Hieracium pillosella* and *Prunella laciniata* have considerably increased their area. *Phleum phleoides* is now quite dominant in some areas but it is a beautiful grass species almost all year round and leaves a lot of space for other herbs. Also the orchid species have probably taken advantage of the mowing management, demonstrating a steady growth in number and area along the years.



After some years of the mowing management *Scabiosa columbaria* has conquered big areas around the house, attracting loads of butterflies. 28 June 2018.

The hay obtained this way is an important ingredient for my vegetable garden. Together with straw, it forms the important mulch layer which covers, protects and enriches the soil. Once the vegetation is mown, I usually leave the hay a couple of days in place to give the seed some time to ripen and fall and not contaminate the vegetable garden. But more than 5 days doesn´t seem to be recommendable, because then the nutrients start to leak out. The movement of nutrients from the wild garden to the vegetable garden is a really nice example of efficient recyling, with clear benefits on both fronts.



Mown area near the ponds. Neighbouring areas have not

such deep soil and are not mown. 24 July 2018.

For mowing I use a traditional scythe. No noise, cheap, almost no maintenance, good exercise: a powerful mix of advantages of the scythe and yet almost forgotten by many people. In my situation it is also an ideal tool because instead of breaking down the vegetation like the traditional grass mowers or weedwackers do, it leaves the vegetation intact enough to easily take away and use as a mulch in the vegetable garden. The relatively short blade of 40cm of my scythe favours a more detailed selecting and avoiding of certain plants and shrubs. The irregularity and, in my case the lack of professionalism, in the handling of the scythe is more a feature than a fault. It offers welcome variation and opportunities in the vegetation layer, and the same holds true for the mowing in phases and on different days on different spots, keeping in mind to do the same thing more or less every year on the same spot. Can you still follow this



This plant *Teucrium capitatum* grows on only three places and so was spared. The short blade of my scythe (40 cm) permits this kind of selection. 24 July 2018.

Apart from the mowing, an important factor has also been the steady growth of (new) shrubs and trees. The sheep herds that roam the region do not enter the terrain and this might be an important factor for the survival of many shrub and tree seedlings (and orchids!).

The general aspect of the terrain is really going into the direction of a

beautiful parklike landscape. At the same time the inverted amount of energy and time has actually been quite limited. It is more a question of steering, encouraging and discouraging than actively manipulating and imposing. Just switching nature on!

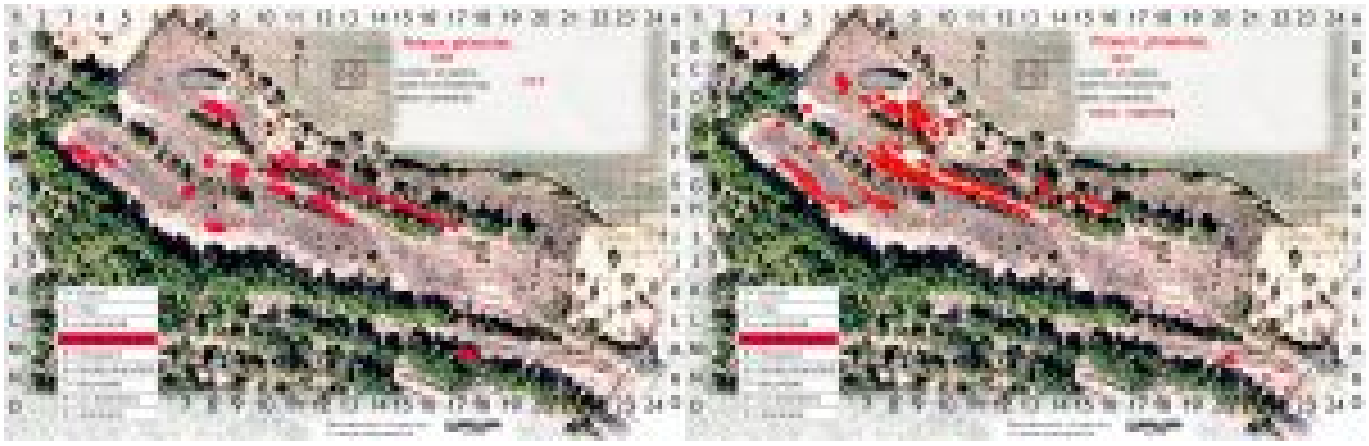


The hay harvest goes to the vegetable garden where it makes a nice mulch layer. 25 July 2018.

As an illustration of the shifts in the vegetation caused by the mowing regime, below you can see the distribution maps of some species which were especially affected, increasing or decreasing their numbers. Fix your attention to the area around the house in the northwest corner where most of the mowing takes place. Also the distribution maps in my article about the orchids on the terrain are quite illustrative.



Changes in the presence of *Scabiosa columbaria* over a 10 year period.



The same for *Phleum phleoides*



The same for *Plantago lanceolata*.



The same for *Bromus diandrus.*
