



Britain in Bloom Marking Criteria– FAQs

Although this question and answer sheet is not exhaustive, it is intended to answer those questions most frequently asked.

Introduction to the Changes to the Standard Marking Sheet that were updated and implemented in 2022:	
Q1.	Why was the Britain in Bloom marking criteria updated?
Q1A.	<p>The Bloom Federation, which includes representatives from all the Bloom Regions and Nations, agreed to update the marking criteria in response to feedback from Bloom groups. The updates reflect the evolving practice of many groups, and the important role that gardeners can play in tackling urgent issues like biodiversity loss and climate change.</p> <p>The criteria are designed to provide guidance around best practice, and groups are encouraged to adopt them and adjust their activities as their own circumstances allow. Employing more sustainable gardening practices is very much a journey rather than an instant fix, and different practices will be appropriate in different places.</p> <p>In 2021 the RHS surveyed all Bloom groups and found that 91% reported their main motivation for participating in Bloom being to improve their local environment for biodiversity, plants, wildlife and their habitats. Most groups were already doing the activities recommended by the criteria.</p> <p>Sustainability and caring for the environment is also a motivating factor for people, particularly young people, to volunteer for Bloom.</p>
Q2.	What changed about the allocation of marks?
Q2A.	There have been no changes to the existing allocation of marks.
Q3.	Will there be changes to the separate Urban Marking Sheet?
Q3A.	<p>The separate Urban Marking Sheet to assess entries to the ‘BIDs’ category had minor updates for 2023 to reflect how urban gardening groups can adopt sustainable gardening practices.</p> <p>Please note the Standard Marking Sheet will be used to assess the Urban Community and Town Centres and City Centres categories in 2024.</p>
Q4.	Will all the Regions and Nations be using the updated marking criteria?
Q4A.	<p>Each Region and Nation is approaching the updated marking criteria differently.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most adopted it in 2022 at the same time as the RHS used it for the Bloom UK Finals; • Others will dictate their own pace of change. <p>If you are uncertain about your area please do contact your local Regional or National coordinator. A full list of contact details is available here: https://www.rhs.org.uk/get-involved/community-gardening/register-your-group</p>

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What were the changes on the Standard Marking Sheet in 2022:	
Q5.	What changed in Section A - Horticulture?
Q5A.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Section A2 Maintenance of Planted Areas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Refers to B3 Environment Management for maintenance techniques such as ‘using other biological and physical controls like hand weeding to avoid the use of pesticides.’ ● Section A3 Plant Selection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Added reference to trees. ○ Added ‘Is there a diverse range of plant-species to attract a variety of insects and wildlife? Is there year-round interest, where appropriate?’ ● Section A4 Plant Quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Added reference to trees.
Q6.	What changed in Section B - Environment?
Q6A.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Section B1 Local Identity & Pride of Place <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Added reference to biodiversity ○ ‘To include cleanliness, absence of litter, graffiti vandalism, flyposting/temporary signage, chewing gum, and effective dog fouling control measures.’ – moved from Section B2 ○ Removed reference to street weeds ● Section B2 Natural Environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Amended wording ‘Is there an understanding of what biodiversity means locally? Have efforts been made to create, restore or maintain appropriate habitats to support wildlife? What has been done to assess the effectiveness of any interventions? E.g. through surveys.’ ○ Added ‘Is nature being considered in all activities, rather than just restricting wildlife-friendly practices to a specific project or area?’ ○ Removed reference to bird/bat boxes and insect hotels ● Section B3 Environmental Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Amended wording ‘Have steps been taken to employ sustainable or ecological gardening practices? E.g. Avoiding chemicals like pesticides and using other biological and physical controls like hand weeding or companion planting. Eliminating the use of peat, implementing solutions like composting, reducing the use of plastics and recycling those used. Taking measures to minimise the use of water.’ ○ Added ‘Where local environmental issues have been identified, have plants or greening solutions been considered, e.g. as rain gardens, green roofs/walls, or as barriers for pollution?’
Q7.	What changed in Section C - Community?
Q7A.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Section C2 Communication, Education and Awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Added reference to environmental importance ● Section C3 Support and Funding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Added reference to be inclusive

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Q8.	What were the changes in the Guidance Notes for Judges and Entrants?
Q8A.	<p>New sections have been added:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance of Planted Areas: The maintenance schedule should take account of biodiversity needs through the seasons; these will vary depending upon setting and location. Examples could include avoiding hedge trimming in nesting season or leaving some grass longer at certain times of year etc. • Plant Selection: Prioritising perennial or pollinator-friendly plants is encouraged where appropriate. If annual bedding is used, groups should carefully consider the provenance and buy from local nurseries that do not use peat, or, if possible, to grow their own. • Natural Environment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The use of sustainable practices and materials should be encouraged wherever possible. ○ When creating, restoring or maintaining habitats to support wildlife, any features should be appropriate to the particular place. They could be as varied as ponds, 'dead' hedges, or the connection of several habitats to make 'pollinator pathways'. When used inappropriately something as simple as a bug hotel can become a bird feeder. ○ Assessing the effectiveness of interventions is incredibly important and all groups should be encouraged to measure their impact. This can be through a simple survey, or through contributing to a broader citizen science project or national monitoring scheme. • Environmental Management: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Groups should minimise their use of plastic, choosing alternative materials where possible, and where unavoidable switching to better plastics such as recycled, recyclable or compostable products. Groups should repeatedly re-use items like plant pots and trays. ○ Groups are encouraged to identify local environmental issues, and tackle them, using plants. These can be very simple or low-cost interventions, e.g. adding a green roof to a bin store, or planting a hedge to reduce pollution near a main road.
Common Environmental Gardening Questions	
General Questions	
Q9.	Is it good practice for an entry to work with lots of environmental groups from the wider community?
Q9A.	Yes, Bloom groups are encouraged to work with lots of different organisations and involve the wider community. Groups should make the judges aware of who has been involved and how they have helped the Bloom entry achieve its goals. This can be evidenced in-person on a tour, during a presentation or through a portfolio.
Q10.	Do you have any recommendations on how community groups can garden more sustainably if they are on a tight budget?

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<p>Q10A.</p>	<p>Groups should think about recycling and re-using equipment and materials wherever possible. Some local councils will loan tools, and some local allotment societies and other like-minded gardening groups may be willing to share resources. This could include finding online plant swapping communities or instigating seed swaps and cuttings swaps.</p> <p>Groups can consider researching opportunities to purchase second-hand equipment such as water butts from online marketplaces. Local industrial estates often give away items such as storage containers and pallets that can be used for water collection or compost heaps. Freecycle is also a good place to source gardening equipment. Groups can sign-up for newsletters from environmental campaigning organisations such as Wildlife Trusts, as they are often a great source of local knowledge, which can include special offers.</p>
<p>Q11.</p>	<p>Can you give an example of how a group has used planting to deal with an environmental issue?</p>
<p>Q11A.</p>	<p>There can be many good examples of using planting to deal with an environmental issue and the appropriateness of a measure will depend on the specific situation.</p> <p>It is important for groups to tell the judges about the environmental issue that they are tackling. Groups should explain how they know they need to take action.</p> <p>The solution can be in progress; and if any positive impacts or statistics have been recorded these should be shared with the judges to demonstrate how the group's aims have been successfully achieved.</p> <p>Examples include but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planting drought resistant plants in an area where water conservation is a priority; • Planting suitable trees and shrubs to capture carbon in areas prone to higher pollution levels; • Building a rain garden or pond in areas prone to flooding; • Introducing sedum or green roofs on bin stores or bus stops to help capture carbon; • Planting a wildflower meadow to increase biodiversity. <p>Judges should be asking entrants about why they have put a measure in place. They will be looking to understand whether a measure was planned or implemented properly and achieved its aim. E.g. Exploring which seed mix a group chose for a wildflower meadow or and whether it has attracted greater biodiversity as a result.</p>
<p>Q12.</p>	<p>Some groups had already completed their designs and ordered their plants before the criteria had been updated, and others are worried about increased costs and supply shortages. Do you expect them to change plans immediately to meet the updated marking criteria?</p>
<p>Q12A.</p>	<p>Groups can continue with their plans, there is no expectation for them to change everything immediately and everywhere.</p> <p>Judges should take into consideration what the entrant is saying about supply or cost issues and find out how this has affected the planting but also future plans. Judges will aim to understand how groups are working towards more</p>

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	<p>sustainable practices and will want to hear about the challenges groups are facing on their way.</p> <p>The journey towards becoming more environmentally conscious is just as important as the outcome and groups should highlight the steps they are taking to make this happen.</p>
Q13.	How can groups measure their environmental impact?
Q13A.	<p>Groups are encouraged to measure their impact, particularly in relation to wildlife. However, this does not need to be detailed scientific analyses.</p> <p>If groups are able to provide simple 'before and after' statistics, images and supporting quotes these can demonstrate the impact of their activities and allow judges to assess their achievements more accurately.</p> <p>This could be as simple as showing an increase or reduction in a specific activity, e.g. this year we used 'xx' bags/bottles compared to 'xx' 2023, etc.</p> <p>Judges should be asking groups questions to draw out this information, e.g. what was this area like this time last year?</p> <p>There are many brilliant citizen science projects held annually that groups may want to join, e.g. Birdwatch: https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch/; Big Butterfly Count https://bigbutterflycount.butterfly-conservation.org/ or Bioblitzes: https://www.nhm.ac.uk/take-part/citizen-science/bioblitz.html. Also, keep an eye out for local surveys through places like regional Wildlife Trusts.</p>
Q14.	Is it appropriate for judges to give groups feedback about a group's environmental practices?
Q14A.	<p>If judges are confident, knowledgeable and able to do so, it is perfectly acceptable for judges to provide feedback on environmental practices. Judges' feedback should always be balanced, whether given on tour or in a report, and judges are advised to avoid sharing personal opinions.</p> <p>Judges are encouraged to be honest when providing feedback on environmental practices and if it is something that they cannot answer or provide support on, they should let the group know that this is the case. Judges might offer to go away and research the matter on behalf of a group, or direct them to resources like the RHS website or their local Wildlife Trust.</p>
Weeds & Pesticides	
Q15.	The reference to street weeds was removed from the criteria. Does this mean that groups should not be removing street weeds and allowing the weeds to grow wild?
Q15A.	<p>The reference to street weeds was removed as it was considered that this may encourage the use of harmful herbicides and the spraying of weed killer. There is no suggestion that weeds should be left unattended, instead physical controls like hand weeding should be considered.</p> <p>If an area of weeds is left to grow to benefit pollinators and other wildlife, then it is good practice to add signage or interpretation to the area explaining the action that has been taken.</p>

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<p>Q16.</p>	<p>What is acceptable or not acceptable with regard to weeds in hard paved areas, such as road gutters? The use of chemicals is not ideal but the alternatives can also be problematic and sometimes less environmentally friendly.</p>
<p>Q16A.</p>	<p>Groups should aim to avoid using herbicides and chemicals entirely, however this may be the favoured option for some councils and out of the control for many groups. If this is the case, groups should try to make their councils aware of the harmful effects caused by the chemicals to nature and the environment and what other methods could be used instead.</p> <p>A variety of different methods can be used depending on the scale of the problem, how easy or safe it is for volunteers to access and clear weeds and the types of weeds.</p> <p>Manual methods such as hoeing and raking can be effective but caution should be taken when asking volunteers to clear roadside gutters. Other natural methods such as using vinegar for spot treatments may work but it is important to consider whether this is appropriate as it could affect other plants or water sources. If in doubt, groups should seek advice and consult experts.</p> <p>Judges should not mark a group down if the local council has made the decision to use chemical methods and it is beyond their control. However, the group should explain this story and whether they have made attempts to influence the council in the use of alternative methods whether successfully or not.</p>
<p>Q17.</p>	<p>How do groups deal with invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed, if the use of herbicides is discouraged?</p>
<p>Q17A.</p>	<p>Groups can consider restricting pests, diseases and weeds by good practice in cultivation methods, cultivar selection, garden hygiene and encouraging or introducing natural enemies, which should be the first line of control for the gardener.</p> <p>However, there may be some instances where natural methods of weed control are not effective against the most invasive species. If chemical controls are used, they should only be used in a minimal and highly targeted way. For advice on this, please see the RHS website: https://www.rhs.org.uk/prevention-protection/chemicals-using-them-in-gardens</p> <p>In instances where chemical controls have been used to treat invasive species like Japanese Knotweed, groups should make the judges aware of the situation, citing your reasons and decision-making process.</p>
<p>Q18.</p>	<p>How do we deal with snails when avoiding the use of pesticides?</p>
<p>Q18A.</p>	<p>Groups can try various methods including hand-picking at evening time when snails are most active, beer traps, or placing copper filings or tape around containers. There are many plants that are slug resistant so these could be grown where there is a large number of slugs and snails. It should be remembered that slugs and snails are essential parts of your garden ecosystem providing food for birds and mammals and speeding up decomposition of plant matter. Creating a healthy ecosystem that encourages predators of slugs and snails is the most sustainable way to control them.</p>

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Q19.	In Scotland we now credit wilder areas with nettles brambles and thorns as that is where caterpillars feed and birds nest. Is this now nationally accepted?
Q19A.	Yes. Groups should be able to convey to judges the importance of these wilder areas on the local flora and fauna. Judges should find out if groups are also raising awareness to why wilder areas have been encouraged to the wider community. For example; groups can use information boards to provide details to the public on the importance of these wilder areas. By doing so groups can give more meaningful engagement to the public that will capture interest, understanding and support.
Peat-Free Gardening	
Q20.	How would you mark a group who are currently in transition to adopting new sustainable gardening methods? For example: trialling a peat free compost in a few hanging baskets to find out which mix works best.
Q20A.	Entrants should be praised for conducting their own trials to support their sustainability goals and judges should ask to see the results of trials and any learning wherever possible. For example, the criteria mentions ‘eliminating’ not ‘eliminated,’ to allow some consideration for groups who are starting the transition to peat free growing media but have not fully implemented it yet. There should however be evidence of a willingness to eliminate peat based composts as soon as is possible. Judges should find out from the entrant their aims and journey towards implementing the sustainable gardening practice, how they are learning from trialling different things, any alternatives they may consider and what they will change in the future.
Q21.	Our group ordered plants and soil a year in advance, but now there is a focus on sustainability especially regarding peat-free compost. What should we do?
Q21A.	We do not expect groups to cancel orders if this will lead to financial loss or reputational risk. Groups can let the judges know how they will explore the use of peat-free compost for future years, this may entail making suppliers know of your intention to order and source peat-free compost and or raising awareness amongst your group by encouraging volunteers to make their own compost.
Q22.	The costs of eliminating peat are prohibitive and it is not currently viable for our group to source peat-free alternatives locally, what should we do?
Q22A.	The journey towards eliminating peat can have cost impacts for groups. Every group is in different circumstances and there is no requirement for groups to have implemented these practices immediately. The changes each group makes should be appropriate and suitable to their individual needs. Where sourcing is an issue - groups should explain to the judges where they have attempted to use alternatives, and where they have been challenged finding peat-free compost. It is often possible to ask local garden centres to supply peat-free compost (including in bulk). You may find other suppliers such as the local milk delivery

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	<p>service and it is becoming more common for supermarkets to stock affordable peat-free compost too. Online marketplaces are often a good source of suppliers of bulk peat free compost which can be supplied as a tipped load with no plastic packaging.</p> <p>Groups should make the judges aware of their approach to sustainable gardening practice, how they are educating members, advocating, informing or influencing suppliers and partners that they would like to garden more sustainably.</p> <p>By highlighting the steps groups are taking to achieve their goals and any challenges faced, groups are presenting valuable evidence of their commitment and intention to garden more sustainably.</p>
Bedding Plants & Floral Displays	
Q23.	Our group will be instigating a hanging basket competition this year. What would be your guidance on the use of bedding plants in these displays?
Q23A.	If the use of bedding plants is the most appropriate option, a balanced plant selection should be considered. For example this may include a mix of perennial and annual bedding plants or a range of plant varieties that could be beneficial to pollinating insects. Groups should make the judges aware of their reasons for their plant selection and include information on how they have considered the provenance and sustainability of bedding plants used.
Q24.	Our group uses bedding plants to ensure our parks and community spaces look their best. We will not get the same impact if we stopped using bedding plants altogether, will this mean our group is marked down?
Q24A.	<p>Many groups have already started to prioritise a more balanced approach to perennial and/or pollinator friendly planting where appropriate, and have been able to create impact though this. However, it is appreciated that there will be occasions when bedding plants are the most appropriate. This might include in baskets or tubs, or to highlight a specific space, or if groups have received donated plants from local garden centres.</p> <p>Judges will be considering whether it is the right plant for the right place, and whether it is the right planting scheme for the right growing area. This should take into account the balance in the range of plant types used.</p> <p>Judges will balance the needs of each entry against the criteria, and will be different for each location. For example, a holiday destination may use more bedding plants in colourful hanging basket displays to attract tourists; this type of planting provides beneficial impact to the community and would not be marked down.</p> <p>If annual bedding is used, groups should carefully consider the provenance and sustainability of how it has been grown regarding peat and transportation. Groups should make judges aware of their reasons for choosing bedding, and explain any long-term aims they may have to reduce bedding in appropriate places.</p>

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Q25.	Are we expected to grow our own bedding plants?
Q25A.	<p>There is no expectation for groups to grow their own bedding plants. It will depend on many factors whether an entry decides to grow their own bedding or not. E.g. A smaller village may save on costs if growing their own but a larger city entry might not be able to do so.</p> <p>Groups should make judges aware of their approach and if annual bedding is used, groups should carefully consider the provenance and sustainability of how it has been grown with regards to peat and transportation.</p>
Q26.	Does the criteria downgrade the marks for floral displays in preference for allowing areas to return to the 'wild'?
Q26A.	<p>There has been no change to the structure on the marking sheet. Floral displays are and remain an important part of the horticultural experience provided to the community. The same marks remain for Section A – Horticulture, which awards marks for Overall Impression, Plant Selection and Plant Quality associated with floral displays.</p> <p>In Section B – Environment, the updated criteria associated with Natural Environment aims to assess how the natural environment is managed across the whole entry taking into account how nature is considered across activities.</p>
Miscellaneous	
Q27.	Will the judges assess everything they see?
Q27A.	<p>The entire tour route is subject to judging; that means what the judges see on the way from one feature stop to another, as well as what they see at all the stops. The judges will expect that the entrant's campaign has considered the entire community and not just the high street or the village square and that, where there are "problem" areas (e.g. vacant premises/plots, eyesores etc.), the entrant has plans in place to address these.</p> <p>NB: The group controls where the tour starts, it does not for example start as soon as judges alight from a train.</p>
Q28.	Recruiting and finding volunteers to get involved with our Bloom entry is becoming more difficult. Do you have any suggestions for getting more diverse and younger volunteers to participate?
Q28A.	<p>It is well known that recruiting younger volunteers due to an aging group demographic is a priority issue for many Bloom groups to address.</p> <p>Groups may find that by encouraging sustainable gardening practices and introducing projects that tackle climate change is a good way to recruit a broader or younger range of volunteers interested in these issues. Groups may want to run focus-groups and give potential volunteers a voice to make change, so that they can positively influence the focus of a group's activity.</p> <p>For more ideas on how to encourage volunteers to participate please visit the RHS website. https://www.rhs.org.uk/get-involved/community-gardening/resources/involving-volunteers</p>



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Further Information	
Q29.	Where can I find out more info about sustainable gardening practices?
Q29A.	<p>The RHS Planet Friendly Gardening campaign can help to equip the UK's 30million gardeners with the knowledge and tools they need to make a meaningful contribution towards tackling climate change and biodiversity loss. For more information and greener gardening advice visit: https://www.rhs.org.uk/gardening-for-the-environment</p> <p>Sign up for the monthly RHS Communities newsletter for tips, advice, stories and opportunities to join digital events about sustainable gardening practices: https://emails.rhs.org.uk/p/7DBY-1SY/rhscommunities</p> <p>Connect to your local Wildlife Trust which has a wealth of knowledge.</p>
Q30.	How can I find out more information about the criteria?
Q30A.	<p>Please direct any queries to the RHS Communities Team:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Email: communities@rhs.org.uk or• Telephone: 0207 8213122 <p>Or to the coordinator of your local Bloom Region or Nation. A full list of contact details is available here:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• https://www.rhs.org.uk/get-involved/community-gardening/register-your-group