

ENVIRONMENT

Every flower matters: leave rural wild flora be

**DYLAN FARRUGIA
and ABNER JOE
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Local councils' continued cutting of wild vegetation is no longer a matter of awareness, nor can it be excused by ignorance. The impacts of urbanisation on Malta's already limited natural spaces are well known.

The Foundation for the Conservation of the Maltese Honey Bee has repeatedly communicated with all local councils, and put forward a clear proposal to protect rural wild flora through bye-laws. Yet these efforts have fallen on deaf ears.

Timing is one of the most critical concerns. Cutting during spring removes flowering plants at their peak, directly depriving pollinators of essential food sources. This includes the Maltese honey bee, declared Malta's national insect in September 2024. Through this declaration, Malta committed to protecting the habitats necessary for the survival of its national insect. Without nectar-rich wild plants, however, this commitment becomes yet another greenwashing initiative.

Rural verges are far from insignificant. In a country facing relentless urban encroachment, they serve as vital ecological corridors providing connectivity, refuge and feeding grounds for a wide range of species. Every remaining strip of wild habitat counts, offering both ecological value and an environmental respite within an increasingly built landscape.

Moreover, frequent cutting does not "improve" the landscape; it actively degrades it by facilitating the spread of invasive species such as fountain grass and the castor oil plant. Fountain grass, being wind-pollinated, provides no benefit to pollinators, while the castor oil plant is highly poisonous. In effect, valuable native flora is replaced by harmful and ecologically barren vegetation.

The perception of "tidiness" must also be challenged. Cutting often creates only the illusion of maintenance while wasting public funds, human resources and effort, and leaving behind a sterile landscape and rows of black bags.

The photos shown here, taken in March in Żurrieq and Mqabba, show rural areas being stripped of wild flora. This mentality must change. A 'clean' landscape is not necessarily a healthy one. Measures such as restricting clearing to appropriate periods of the year are effective and have been clearly communicated.

The foundation continues to engage with policymakers to advocate for change, and we remain hopeful that progress will come to fruition soon. However, broader public support is essential.

If readers are concerned about the continued removal of wild vegetation, we urge them to contact their local councillors and raise this issue. Speak up,

and help drive the shift in mentality that is urgently needed.

As former president Anton Buttigieg so beautifully reminds us in his poem *Lellux*, the quiet beauty of our wild flora deserves not only our admiration, but our protection.

*Kull fejn thares u timrah
lellux ma' kullimkien:
lellux go nofs is-silla
lellux fuq is-sisien:
lellux fid-djar imwaqqgħa
lellux ma' tul is-swar;
lellux għal-blat tal-plajja,
lellux fuq il-kampnar.*

*Xuxtu hadrani mżejna
bi fjuri safranin
fid difa tar-rebbiegħa
ileqqu qalbenin;
donnhom flok qatriet t'ilma*



Rural areas in the Mqabba-Żurrieq areas stripped of wild flora last month. PHOTOS: FOUNDATION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF THE MALTESE HONEY BEE

*Ix-xita raxxet xmux
li birku f'kull indana
fl-xtiel tal-lellux.*

Dylan Farrugia and Abner Joe Buttigieg are co-founders and

administrators of the Foundation for the Conservation of the Maltese Honey Bee. To stay informed about the foundation's latest updates, follow its Facebook and Instagram accounts.