

How to: Make your boundaries wildlife-friendly



Not the most beautiful garden boundary, but it's pretty good for wildlife – porous with a hedge and undergrowth

Photo: Steve Head

Boundaries are the edges of your garden, where your property meets your neighbours, the street, or if you are lucky, open fields. They also include the walls of your house itself, and those of any other buildings like sheds and garages. It's easy to overlook the boundaries or edges of your garden, but they can be havens for wildlife. You can even add to your garden's habitats by creating internal boundaries dividing the garden into functional areas – like a veggie patch or compost bin area. It's important that your boundaries are porous, so that animals in your garden can cross into those of your neighbours, vital for hedgehogs which need a large area to forage.

Target species: If you turn your sterile boundaries into habitats, all wildlife can benefit, especially birds, mammals, and amphibians. Live boundaries, like hedges or climbers, support pollinators and other insects too.

Types of boundary features

Hedges

Hedges can be havens for wildlife, as well as very effective garden boundaries. Hedges can be a source of nectar for pollinators, berries for birds and shelter for a range of wildlife. They are very much better than larch fence panels, brick walls or chain-link fences.

- Hedges can be planted from scratch, or grown through an existing chain-link or paling fence
- We have a special guide on planting and maintaining hedges – How to: [Plant and manage](#) a hedge

Fences

- Chain-link fences are made of (usually) plastic-covered heavy wire woven into a wide flexible mesh and are relatively cheap but not at all attractive. The mesh size of 50mm is enough for most animals to pass through but much too small for hedgehogs. Chain-link fences are ideal for making a “fedge” – a hedge grown through a fence.

Photo: Daderot, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons



- Metal railings aren't common in modern houses but can still be found in some front gardens. They are low maintenance and wildlife friendly, in that they allow free movement of animals, and you can grow hedges or shrubs through them

- Larch-lap or feather-edge fence panels are made from overlapping thin strips of treated timber nailed on to a frame, and come in a standard length of 1.83m and from 0.9 to 1.8m high. They are treated to prevent rot, and last for ten or more years. The treatment is usually “tanalising” impregnating the wood with copper and some organic fungicides. This isn’t ideal for a wildlife garden, but they are very commonly installed, and replacing them would be expensive. They provide complete privacy from your neighbours and so are major barriers for wildlife. Perhaps the fence in the photo is due for change? Photo: Steve Head



- Picket fences are more wildlife friendly, made of (usually) treated timber but with spaces between the vertical pales making it easy to grow plants through, and for animals to move. They make very good internal fences within a garden, and look in keeping with a cottage style

Photo: W.Carter, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons



- Hurdle or woven fences are traditionally made of hazel, sometimes bamboo is used in a similar way. They are excellent for wildlife and are usually untreated and quite porous. However, buying hand-made hurdle panels, is expensive and they may not last very long. A really good project would be to make your own from [weaving coppiced hazel stems](#). They are ideal for internal screening, such as around a bin store.

Walls

These are solid structures built of brick or stone. Plain brick walls are useless for wildlife, and cemented stone walls not a lot better, although both store heat for insects to keep active. They become *much* better if you have climbers and other plants grown over them. The best wall is a traditional dry-stone wall, built by carefully laying large stones on top of each other without using any mortar or cement. The cavities are excellent places for wildlife to shelter, especially over winter, and over time plants establish themselves in between cracks.

How to do it

Start by looking at your existing boundaries, as part of your overall garden design – see ‘How To: [Plan a wildlife-friendly garden](#)’. Do you want to change the structure of your boundary (eg replace a wooden fence with a hedge) or make the best of an existing boundary by new planting? If it’s to be a new feature, could you add a new habitat type to your garden?

Improving fences

- Make sure that any solid fences such as larch-lap have holes at the base of them allowing wildlife such as hedgehogs or frogs to pass between gardens while they forage. A hole of 12cm square will be large enough for hedgehogs to pass through, but small enough to keep cats out.
- You could replace ageing larch-lap or feather-edge panels with more wildlife-friendly paling fences or even hurdles.
- Close boarded fences provide little for wildlife, but you can hugely improve them by trailing climbing plants over them. Put up a simple wooden or wire trellis about 4cm from the panel so plants (and

animals) can weave in and out of the space. Ivy, honeysuckle, and both native and horticultural clematis are excellent, as are climbing and rambling roses. See our web pages on [climbers](#).

- You could put in a couple of nest boxes on the fence, which will be hidden when the climbing plants grow up.
- If you can afford the space it is perfectly possible to plant a hedge close-up *inside* a close-boarded fence, provided it will get enough light to grow properly
- Porous fences such as chain-link or picket fences can be turned into “[fedges](#)” (fence/hedge) by planting hedgerow species to grow through them

Brick or cemented stone walls

These can be greatly improved by covering them with climbing plants, which provide shelter for nesting and overwintering animals, and also help by insulating your house in winter and cooling it in summer. See our [web pages](#) on the best climbers for wildlife.



Cemented stone wall supporting passion flower and *Campsis radicans* plus several other species at the base.



Plain-rendered house wall much improved by climbing wisteria and roses. Collared doves nest in here each year.

Photos: Steve Head

- Ivy, Virginia creeper and *Hydrangea petiolaris* can cling to walls without your help
- Most climbers need the support of a trellis or wires strung between eye-screws set into the wall about 4 cm above the wall surface. These include species of clematis, honeysuckle, wisteria, jasmine and climbing and rambling roses
- Consider the light the plants will get. North facing walls get little light, and ivy is the best bet for them. Clematis, roses, Virginia creeper and honeysuckle are happy with moderate shade
- Most climbers including wisteria like full sun, but south-facing walls get very hot, so make sure you provide enough water to sustain them

Dry-stone walls

Dry-stone walls are valuable for a large range of wildlife, both as a place to shelter and as a place to warm up. Dry-stone makes attractive boundary walls and can work well on a smaller scale if you have limited space; a small low wall surrounding a raised bed can have many benefits.

- You will need to buy a lot of large stones to make the wall. Slate or limestone are commonly used but make sure they are sustainably sourced. Think about the size of the wall you want to create and how many stones will be needed. If you live in a stone-rich area or have a stone-built house, try to use local stone which then looks “right”
- A wall that is partly in the shade and partly in the sun will work best for wildlife. If this is not possible, then a wall in a damp, shady area will also work well.

- Read up [about building walls](#), this is a skilled task, and heavy stones can crush fingers. It's best to keep the wall low so it is in no danger of toppling over and hurting someone. YouTube has many good tutorials of how to stack walls. When done correctly, the wall can last many hundreds of years!
- Dig a trench of 15-20 cm depth which will hold your dry-stone wall and put a layer of large stones on the bottom. Then you can start to build; dry stone walls are made from two walls of larger stones which meet at the top, with smaller stones filled in between to ensure there are cracks and crevices throughout the wall.
- Place the larger stones in a similar fashion to how you would place bricks, ensuring that your wall is sturdy as you build it. To finish, add a layer of coping stones (flat stones bought separately) to the top.



This dry-stone wall of Dartmoor granite was built and planted in 3 days for a gold medal winning garden at Chelsea Flower Show in 2010.

Photo: Steve Head

How easy is it to do?

Easy to moderate. Trailing climbers over your fence is easy and making suitable gaps so wildlife can get through is pretty simple. Building a low dry-stone wall is simple but does require a fair amount of manual effort! Building a high dry-stone wall is very hard and skilled work and we recommend you consider taking a [training course](#).

How much will it cost?

For building a dry-stone wall, buying sustainably sourced large stones can be expensive. Cotswold stone blocks for example cost over £230 for a bulk bag that will make about 3 square metres of face wall. It might be best to wait for a windfall of second-hand building material to appear. Climbing plants can be bought as plugs for under £5 or in pots for up to £15. It is easy to establish ivy from a rooted section weeded out from elsewhere in your garden.

How effective is it for the target species?

Very effective indeed. These improvements will benefit a wide range of garden vertebrates and invertebrates, not to mention the humans also using the garden!

Things to be aware of

- Altering boundaries between you and your neighbours can be a minefield – think of disputes over leylandii hedges! Make sure that you legally own the boundary you want to change (look at your house deeds) but in any case, discuss your plans with your neighbour
- It is very important to make sure that a dry-stone wall is sturdy and not likely to topple or fall, especially if it is in a commonly used area. The most important factor for sturdiness is how the stone is stacked; YouTube has many good tutorials of how to stack walls. When done correctly, the wall can last many hundreds of years! If you have any doubt, stick to low (75cm) stone walls
- If a dry-stone wall is beyond your means, a rockery made from rubble dug up in your garden makes an ecologically good, but perhaps less attractive substitute

Further information

How To: [Plan a wildlife-friendly garden](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plan_garden.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_plan_garden.pdf

How to: [Plant and manage](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_hedges.pdf) a hedge www.wlgf.org/ht_hedges.pdf

Our web pages on [climbing plants](http://www.wlgf.org/climbers.html) www.wlgf.org/climbers.html

Wildlife Trusts instructions on [building a dry-stone](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions/how-build-mini-stone-wall-0) wall www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions/how-build-mini-stone-wall-0

Conservation Volunteers guidance on [making dry stone](http://www.conservationhandbooks.com/build-repair-dry-stone-wall/) walls www.conservationhandbooks.com/build-repair-dry-stone-wall/

Training [courses](http://www.dswa.org.uk/training-courses) in dry-stone walling www.dswa.org.uk/training-courses

Making [woven hazel](http://www.gardenista.com/posts/hardscaping-101-woven-fences-design-guide/) fences www.gardenista.com/posts/hardscaping-101-woven-fences-design-guide/