

How to: Create and look after hedges



Hedges can be great havens for wildlife, as well as very effective garden boundaries. Hedges provide a source of nectar and pollen for pollinators, leaves for herbivorous insects, berries for birds and shelter for a range of wildlife. You can also benefit from a natural harvest from a hedge: the berries and flowers of elder, bramble, rose hips, and blackthorn's sloes all have a use in the kitchen.



Photo: juliacasado1, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons
Mixed species hedge



Photo: Jaggery, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons
Old country hedge

If you have space and a suitable boundary, one of the best things you can do for wildlife is to establish a mixed-species hedge to replace (or grow over) a brick wall or fence. The plants you use are really all large or small native trees species kept to a small size, so establishing a mixed hedge is like putting in a mini-woodland which will support lots of interesting insects and provide shelter and food for birds and mammals.

Target species:

Literally hundreds of insect species feed as adults or larvae on hedge plants, and if the hedge isn't too trimmed to be able to flower, many hedge plants attract pollinators. Birds find hedges excellent places to catch food for their young, and they often build their nests in taller or denser hedgerows.

How to do it:

There is quite a lot of work involved in planting and maintaining hedges, so read the suggestions below and look up our web pages and other guides so you are sure what you want to achieve before you start.

Choosing hedge plants

- There are many hedge plant species to choose from. Native hedgerow plants are best for wildlife, with hawthorn, blackthorn, holly and privet all supporting a wide range of garden wildlife. There are several larger tree species not suited to small gardens which adapt well to being pruned into hedges, including crab apple, elder, beech and hornbeam. We have a full list of recommended hedge plants on our website [here](#). Generally, for the neatest look gardeners prefer single-species hedges which have a uniform appearance but planting a mix of species gives much more benefit to wildlife.

- You often find climbing and rambling species such as ivy, bramble and dog rose appearing naturally in an established hedge, and these are to be welcomed as they support more wildlife. You can introduce them (and other [climbers](#)) once a new hedge has grown up enough for them to climb through.

Planting hedges

Start by considering the size of the hedge and growth habits of the hedge species you have selected. How many individual plants will you need to make a hedge of your desired density? How high and how wide can you let it grow? If it will become the boundary with your neighbour, you should plant the hedge well inside your own garden boundary so that as the hedge fills out it doesn't steal space from your neighbour.

- The best and cheapest way to plant a hedge is using bare-root whips which are young, mostly leafless plants with no soil around their roots. It is best to order these from hedging suppliers because garden centres don't usually stock them. They come in bundles, and you must either plant them immediately, or "heel them in" by temporally planting them in loose soil to keep the roots moist. Whips may seem small and weak, but usually establish much better and grow more quickly than expensive potted plants.
- For best results, plant your hedge from early autumn to mid-winter when the soil is moist, unfrozen, and seasonal rain will usually look after the watering. It is very inadvisable to try to plant bare-root plants in drier and warmer months
- Place the whips (or potted plants) 30-60cm apart, depending on the density you want to achieve, and the vigour of the species. For a wide hedge, plant in two staggered rows 45 cm apart
- Plant them in 20 cm holes, with plenty of loosened soil, and spread out the roots. Whips should be planted so that the point on the stem where the roots first appear is just under the soil surface
- It is a good plan to mulch the new plants to help keep them moist and warm
- Hedges need to be well-watered while they are being established, especially for the first month
- If your hedge is planted adjacent to a field, you will need to protect the young plants from rabbits with spiral guards

Fedges

If you don't have the opportunity to create or improve a hedge you might be able to grow plants over or through a man-made fence to create a 'fedge' (*fence/hedge*). This works very well with otherwise ugly chain-link metal fences.

- For a chain-link or picket fence, plant a single row of your chosen species close to the fence so the majority of the daily sunshine passes through the fence first – this will encourage the new fedge to grow through the metal links towards the light. Once established you can trim a fedge in the same way as a typical hedge.
- Larch-lap or feather-edge fence panels let no light through and hedges can only be established on the sunlit side, but it's usually better to grow [climbers](#) up them instead
- Because fedge plants are supported by the underlying fence, you can establish climbing species from the start which would not be practical in a brand-new hedge. See our pages on [climbing plants](#) for guidance, but we would particularly recommend ivy as it is evergreen and its dense growth is a refuge for insects and small birds, and its nectar and berries are a valuable food source for wildlife.



Dead hedges

Dead hedges are made by stuffing small branches, twigs and leaves into a simple supporting frame of vertical stakes driven into the ground. The hedge material isn't alive – but dead hedges provide shelter for lots of small vertebrates and invertebrates, in much the same way as [log piles](#), although log piles are better for fungi and wood-borers.

Photo: 14GTR, via Wikimedia Commons

Managing hedges

Hedges work best for wildlife if they are managed well, and if you don't manage them at all they will grow into a ragged line of small and eventually big trees. Hedges are managed by pruning to provoke lots of side branching and trimming to keep growing shoots within the desired size and shape.

- Classically, suburban hedges were heavily trimmed to a geometrical rectangular form, but for wildlife go for a "country hedge" look with less constrained growth, which will allow more flowers and berries to form. Keep it between 1.5 and 3 metres in height and trim all horizontal branches back to behind the desired hedge front before they grow too strong or the hedge will get fatter every year.



A very neat suburban single-species hedge. Although this could be better for wildlife if not so closely clipped, and with some more species mixed in, this is still a useful wildlife habitat

- Try to keep the hedge as dense as possible right down to the ground, so it provides cover and shelter for mammals like hedgehogs and mice, and refuges for toads and frogs.
- Do not cut back or prune between early March and late August as birds may be nesting, also delay cutting back as late as possible in the winter as the berries will provide valuable winter food.



Hedge laying is a technique still used in farmland to keep hedges dense and stock-proof at ground level. It involves nearly severing established stems at ground level and laying them nearly flat against each other supported by vertical pegs. This is not necessary for domestic hedges, but you can learn about hedge laying [here](#) and try it if you wish.

How easy is it to do?

Planting hedges is quite easy although it does involve a good bit of digging. Hedges don't take a lot of maintenance, pruning for shape in the winter of the first couple of years as they grow, then clipping them once or twice a year to keep them within the size and shape you want.

How much will it cost?

Individual hedge whips can be bought for about £1.50 each, often with bulk discount on mixed species packs bringing the cost down to about £1 per plant. Individual pot-grown or root-ball hedge plants usually cost £3-£7 each. Even allowing for a 10% failure rate with bare-root plants, they are still the best choice.

Golden rules – what the science tells us.

- Hedges love growing sideways and will rapidly get too wide if you don't manage them regularly!
- Avoid pruning or otherwise disturbing hedges during the spring and early summer when birds are nesting
- Letting stems grow on in the spring and summer maximises flowering and berry production, so do your hard pruning in the winter after the berries have been eaten
- Don't clear away dead leaves and stems from under the hedge, these make great habitat for mammals, amphibians and insects
- If you have lots of room you can add more interest to your hedge by allowing some of the tree species to grow on, leaving gaps between them of ten metres or so. These "standard" trees will be much appreciated by birds

Be aware that...

- Boundaries are a matter of interest to your neighbours as well as yourself, and many disputes have started from complaints about badly sited or managed (usually Leyland cypress) hedges. It is good practice to consult your neighbours before you make changes which could affect them, and if you do so before you start work you will usually find they are helpful and positive
- Hedges can be thirsty and create deep shade, so plants close to them may be inhibited

What will you see?

Not a lot unless you take time to watch and look carefully, but then you will see birds visiting hedges to feed, others flying in and out to their nests, and caterpillars and other insects on the leaves. And it's not just seeing – hedges are often alive with birdsong. If the hedge has ivy or holly in it, look out for the beautiful holly blue butterfly.

Further information

How to: Make your [boundaries](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_boundaries.pdf) wildlife friendly www.wlgf.org/ht_boundaries.pdf

How to: Make [habitat piles](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_habitat_piles.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_habitat_piles.pdf

Our website pages on [hedge plants](http://www.wlgf.org/hedge_plants.html) www.wlgf.org/hedge_plants.html

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

RHS advice on [hedge planting](http://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/types/hedges/planting) www.rhs.org.uk/plants/types/hedges/planting

National [Hedgelaying Society](http://www.hedgelaying.org.uk) www.hedgelaying.org.uk