

Native Hedges for Wildlife

Wildlife Hedges

Why have a plain ugly fence, when a green, living boundary can bring the riches of flowers, scent, berries, rich autumn colours and wildlife? Yes, a hedge can be all that, and one made out of thorny species will deter uninvited guests too. Hedges can define property boundaries, break an area up into rooms, act as a windbreaker and can be evergreen or deciduous. What is more a thick hedge, that is not over-pruned, will provide homes and food for many insects and birds, who will shelter, hibernate and nest in it and feast on the flowers and berries. Climbers can also add extra thickness and interest. This fact sheet shows you how to create and maintain a wildlife-friendly hedge.



Choosing Your Plants

The most beneficial hedges for wildlife are those that consist of a mixture of native shrub species as shown below:

Native Shrubs Suitable for Hedges

Hawthorn	Blackthorn	Hazel	Guelder rose
Dog rose	Crab apple	Spindle	Holly

Buying your plants

Hedge plants are normally sold as bare rooted whips (small plants up to 80cm). These will establish better than large plants provided the roots do not dry out. The roots are very delicate and can be easily killed in no time at all by winds, frost, sun or snow. To prevent this happening, keep the whips in plastic bags up until the very moment they are planted. If the plants arrive before you are ready to plant them, heel them into the ground as quickly as possible to safeguard the roots.

Planting a Hedge

- Plant between November and March when the ground is not frozen or covered with snow.
- Dig over your selected site, removing all weeds and roots. If possible, mix in plenty of well-rotted mature or other organic matter this will improve moisture retention and provide the new hedge with plenty of food. If the soil is heavy clay, add some grit and sand to improve drainage further.
- To achieve a thick hedge, it is advisable to plant 6 plants per metre, in double staggered rows.
- Mark out the rows with lines of string and dig a hole for each plant or a trench. Place the plant in the hole ensuring the roots hang straight. The plant should be planted to the same depth as it was in the nursery. A slight change in colour will indicate the level, known as the root collar. Back fill with soil and gently firm in with the heel of your boot. Water well. If rabbits are present, protect each plant with a tree guard or erect a rabbit proof fence.

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Aftercare of New Hedge

- Water regularly during the first summer after planting.
- During the first 5 years after planting, remove any weeds. These will compete for water nutrients and hinder the establishment of the hedge. A layer of mulch will help suppress weeds and reduce the amount of weeding required.
- In the first spring, cut back the shrubs to 45-60cm above the ground. This will encourage bushy growth resulting in a thicker hedge.
- Replace any dead plants in the autumn to prevent gaps forming in the hedge.

Long-term management for well-established hedges

- Deciduous hedges

For a thick hedge, prune each side alternately, every 3 years between November and February. If possible, try to cut sections of hedge at different times, so there is always an undisturbed place for wildlife. To promote a thick base, trim the hedge to a rounded or topped 'A' shape.

- Laying

If a hedge has been neglected and it has grown tall and gappy, it can be laid. This involves cutting branches partway through, laying them horizontally, and pegging them in position in order to create a strong thick hedge. This will extend the life of the hedge and encourage thick growth at the base.



Climbers

Once a hedge is established, climbers can be introduced to add extra thickness and biodiversity interest. A thick hedge is better for nesting and provides more shelter and food for wildlife.

Climbers for hedges	
Honeysuckle	Common native Ivy
Old Man's Beard	White and Black Bryony

Hedgerow Plants

Additional wildlife value can be added by the introduction of native wildflower seed or plugs at the base of the hedge.

Native Plants Suitable for Hedges	
Foxglove	Herb Robert
Primrose	Red campion
Hedge bedstraw	White deadnettle
Hedge woundwort	Tufted vetch

