

CHOOSING YOUR GARDEN HEDGE

Why Plant a Hedge?

Hedges are an important part of our landscape and can be an ideal garden boundary. They have many benefits including:

-  Providing shelter and reducing noise
-  Wildlife value for insects, birds and mammals visiting your garden
-  Pest control, as hedges provide habitat for natural predators
-  Privacy from neighbours
-  Security, prickly hedges are a great deterrent
-  Long lasting, saving money compared to fencing
-  Visually attractive; they provide varied interest from one season to the next

This leaflet will help you to choose the right hedge for your garden.

THE WILDLIFE VALUE OF HEDGES

Hedges are essentially linear woodlands in our countryside. Even though they were originally used as a means of marking field boundaries, they also add to the character of the countryside and act as wildlife corridors for mammals and birds to move from one place to another, even in our towns. In fact hedges occupy more land than all of our nature reserves put together. Hedges can provide food and shelter for insects, amphibians, mammals and birds if they are looked after.

In Northern Ireland over thirty species of birds regularly rely on hedges for breeding, shelter and feeding. With a hedge in your garden you may attract a number of these. Hawthorn, blackthorn and hazel are particularly good for wildlife as they support a large number of insect species. Wrens and hedge sparrows feed on these insects while thrushes and blackbirds feed on earthworms and other grubs in the hedge bottom.

In autumn haws, blackberries, rose hips and sloes provide rich pickings for yellowhammers, bullfinches and chaffinches. Small mammals including hedgehogs may also take nuts and berries from the hedge.

A hedge can provide interest and enjoyment all year round.

TRADITIONAL HEDGES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Hedges and their trees give character to the countryside and contribute to the

distinctiveness of local areas. Throughout much of Northern Ireland most of our hedges contain hawthorn (also known as may, quick thorn or white thorn) and ash. There are some areas though where this is different. In the Mourne and Sperrins many of the hedges are gorse (also known as whin) and in Fermanagh the traditional hedge is a mixture of

hawthorn, willow and blackthorn. In Antrim a lot of hedges were traditionally planted with beech, which provides a stunning display in autumn. Hedges are an important part of our countryside but they are under considerable pressure as there are many threats to them and are not widely planted today.

THREATS TO HEDGES

We are gradually losing the traditional hedges in our countryside as a result of removal and neglect. Much of this loss is a result of the enlargement of farm fields and through development of houses and roads, especially on the edges of towns and villages. Of the hedges we have, many are suffering from neglect. Neglected hedges become overgrown and 'gappy' and will eventually die. Fortunately, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is

Traditional hedges

encouraging farmers to plant new hedges and Roads Service is replacing hedges lost through road widening and realignment schemes.



Speckled Wood Butterfly on bramble



Blue Tit



Hedge removal



WHAT CAN I DO?

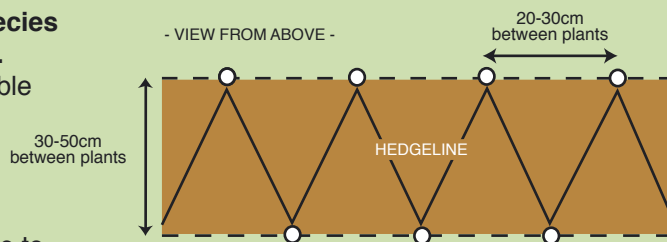
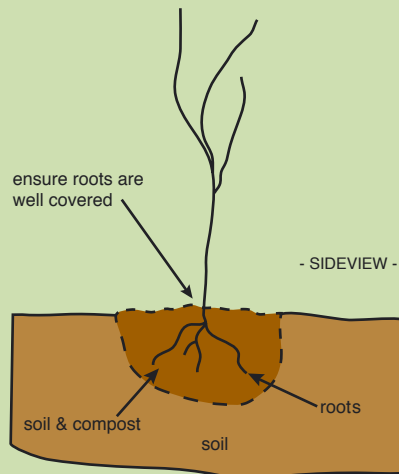
This is where we can all help, by following these guidelines:

Keep your existing hawthorn hedge.

If you have a hawthorn, blackthorn or gorse hedge in your garden the most important point is to keep it. If it is 'gappy', fill in the gaps with new plants or if it is not too old you could try to lay it. For more information on laying a hedge, see the further reading section. If there are trees along the hedge, it is beneficial to wildlife and the landscape to keep these too.

Plant a new hedge of native species or species beneficial to wildlife.

Choose a mix of species in the table below to plant your hedge to suit your location and function. The front of your property should blend in with the surrounding hedges. Use three to four year-old saplings; set 20-30cm apart in two staggered rows which are at least 30cms apart (see diagram). It is best to plant deciduous species between October and March (when the ground is not frozen) and evergreens in September or April.



Maintain your hedge.

A hedge must be looked after to benefit you and wildlife. The best hedges are thick with wide bases. Ideally hedges should be trimmed every two to three years to be of

greatest benefit to wildlife, as this provides the highest quantity of fruit. However for a tidy hedge, trimming can be carried out either in September or in January or February each year. They should not be trimmed during the nesting season from March to early August and if there are trees present they should be avoided. It is also important not to neglect your hedge. High and overgrown hedges often need costly specialist equipment or professional help to get them back into shape and are of less value to wildlife. They can also be a nuisance to neighbours.

By planting and maintaining a hedge in your garden you are providing important wildlife habitat.

WHAT SPECIES TO CHOOSE (AND WHAT NOT TO CHOOSE)

The many benefits of growing hedges along your boundary depend on selecting the right plants for the situation. If you choose an unsuitable variety you could be faced with a range of problems, especially if the hedge grows too big. It will be difficult to trim and may cut out light to your garden or house. Its roots could deprive other plants

of water or nutrients and interfere with paths and buildings. Oversized hedges will intrude on your garden space and may cause problems with neighbours. Species such as Leyland and Lawson's cypresses and privet require frequent cutting, as they grow very quickly, which is not beneficial to nesting birds. Also cypress hedges look out of place in our countryside.



What not to choose - suburban 'Cypress' hedge


Luckily there are a wide range of species which are not difficult to maintain and will provide an attractive feature rich in wildlife, whether in a town or in the countryside. Native species are of more benefit to wildlife as they have been part of our environment for a long time. The following species are of greatest value to wildlife in the garden:

HEDGE SELECTOR TABLE

SPECIES	NATIVE	HEIGHT IF UNPRUNED	SOILS	FLOWERS	FRUIT	SPINES	AUTUMN/WINTER INTEREST	WILDLIFE INTEREST
Hawthorn	✓	small tree quick growing	wide tolerance	✓	✓	✓	berries	Supports good insect population, many birds feed and nest in it and considered one of the most important bird fruits in Northern Ireland.
Hazel	✓	small tree quick growing	prefers fertile moist alkaline or neutral soils				nuts	Good for insects and nuts eaten by birds and mammals.
Blackthorn	✓	small tree quick growing	wide tolerance except acid soils including peat	✓	✓	✓	berries	Early flowering. Good for insects and provides cover and food for birds. Can be invasive.
Holly	✓	small tree slow growing	wide tolerance except poorly drained soils		✓	✓	evergreen leaves and berries	Attracts Holly Blue butterfly; female trees have berries eaten by thrushes, fieldfare, starling and woodpigeon.
Gorse	✓	large shrub	prefers poor dry soils	✓		✓	evergreen	Good cover for birds particularly linnets, yellowhammer and whitethroat. Attracts insects.
Yew		large tree slow growing but long-lived	prefers well drained alkaline soils		✓		evergreen	Female trees have fruit eaten by thrushes.
Beech		large tree quick growing	well drained - sand and limestone		✓		retains leaves in winter	Supports only small insect population but provides all year cover for birds and nuts eaten by tits, and chaffinches.
Firethorn		large shrub	wide tolerance	✓	✓	✓	evergreen leaves and berries	Red-berried variety best for birds. Attracts butterflies.
Cotoneaster		large shrub	well drained soils. tolerates salt	✓	✓		evergreen leaves and berries	All of interest to birds except Cotoneaster cononspicuax.
Escallionia		large shrub	dislikes wet soils and chalk but tolerates salt	✓			evergreen	Attracts butterflies including Holly Blue.
Hornbeam		large tree	prefers rich soil or clay				retains leaves in winter	All year cover for birds.
Barberry		large shrub	wide tolerance	✓	✓	✓	evergreen and berries	Good nesting protection and berries lasts into winter.

YOU CAN ALSO ADD SOME INTEREST TO YOUR HEDGE TO BENEFIT WILDLIFE

Honeysuckle	✓	small shrub	needs well drained soils	✓	✓		berries	Fruit can attract warblers, thrushes and bullfinches. Attracts butterflies including Small White.
Ivy	✓	small shrub	wide tolerance	✓	✓		flowers in winter	Provides nesting and roosting for small birds and berries eaten by robins, thrushes, blackcaps and woodpigeons. Attracts insects and butterflies and is a food plant for the Holly Blue butterfly.
Bramble	✓	small shrub	wide tolerance	✓	✓	✓	berries	Berries eaten by many birds and thicket provides cover for wrens and warblers. Attracts butterflies including Red Admiral.
Elder	✓	small tree	wide tolerance	✓	✓		berries	Attract insects in summer and birds in autumn.
Dog Rose	✓	small shrub	dislikes wet soils and exposed sites	✓	✓	✓	berries	Attracts good number of insects and haws can attract greenfinches.
Guelder Rose	✓	small shrub	dislikes very acid and very dry soils	✓	✓	✓	berries	Attracts small number of insects but berries can attract greenfinches.
Spindle	✓	large shrub	prefers lime-rich soils	✓	✓		berries split to reveal seeds and has brilliant autumn foliage	Birds attracted to the fruit and seeds. Good for insects.



Further Reading

Hedging

Alan Brooks & Elizabeth Agate

Publisher: BTCV

ISBN: 0 946752 17 6

Field Boundaries – managing gappy and overgrown hedges
DARD

Publisher: Department of Agriculture Northern Ireland

ISBN: 1 85527 156 7

Field Boundaries – hedges – planting and aftercare
DARD

Publisher: Department of Agriculture Northern Ireland

ISBN: 1 85527 155 9

Web links

www.ehsni.gov.uk – further details on species rich hedgerows

www.bbc.co.uk/gardening – species details and gardening advice

www.rspb.org.uk – hedges and birds