



# hedges



## what are they?

Hedges are living boundaries made by planting a row of trees, and later cutting the stems and 'laying' them to create a hedge – a barrier that can last for thousands of years if maintained well. They're more of a lowland phenomenon – with dry stone walls often being used in higher areas such as the Yorkshire Moors and Dales.

Different styles of hedgelaying emerged from different parts of the country. The prevalent style is Midland, in which the stems are laid at angle, giving hedges height and making them a barrier for cattle. In the South-West, where the livestock is predominantly sheep, the stem is cut and laid horizontally, which doesn't give as much height.

There are several other styles, and in Devon and Cornwall there are often hedge-banks, partly because poor soil prevents the growth of vigorous hedges, and partly because sites are exposed. They're hard work, but were built centuries ago, to mark out very small holdings.

Hooper's Rule states that you can tell the age of a hedge by the number of different species in a 30-yard length (excluding ivy) – each species representing a century. There are major exceptions to this rule, because after the enclosures of common land, landowners often planted hedges with almost all hawthorn, because the thorns kept the commoners out. Also, new hedges are often planted with a mix of different species.

There are ancient hedges scattered across the country – often where agricultural land is poor and there hasn't been intensive farming. Exmoor is a good example, where there are a number of very old hedges. There are still Anglo-Saxon hedges alive and well in the UK, which is the epicentre of hedges – mainly because of the complicated history of enclosures. After WW2, the growth in industrial agriculture meant that thousands of miles of hedges were removed – although there's been a revival in recent years.



*Stems are cut almost all the way through to lay them.*



*Typical English countryside with hedgerows.*

## what are the benefits?

These days, it's much cheaper and easier for a farmer to install a wire fence than to plant and manage a hedge. There are grants to encourage hedge planting and laying, but there are also plenty of benefits – for smallholders really, rather than industrial farms.

- Hedges provide numerous benefits to livestock, including, previously, protection from large predators (bears existed in the UK until the early Middle Ages, and wolves until the 15th century in England and maybe 300 years later in Scotland) – especially the youngsters.
- They also provide windbreaks, plus additions to their diet – animals love to nibble on hedges.
- They help stop the spread of diseases in animals, as they can't touch each other through a hedge, as they can with a fence.
- Hedges provide food for humans too – blackberries, sloes, hazelnuts, hops, rose hips etc.
- They're a boon for wildlife, such as hedgehogs, insects, amphibians, birds, voles and shrews, snakes, lizards etc., providing food, shelter, blossom for pollinators, and corridors for movement.
- They also store carbon and prevent soil erosion.
- In cities, hedges are good at combatting pollution. They're better than trees for absorbing particulates, as their leaves are at exhaust level, rather than up in the canopy. The privet around urban gardens is a cultivar bred from the native privet, which is also used in hedging.
- They also add beauty to the landscape (at least something good came out of the horror of the enclosures).



## what can I do?

If you're serious, get a good book or attend a course. Search online for current grants for hedge planting and laying.

**Species:** get hedge plants from a specialist nursery - native species (most useful to wildlife) and grown in the UK - genetically, they'll be suited to UK conditions and wildlife, they won't be transported as far, and you won't be importing diseases or pests. You'll need to ask; or go to a nursery you know is growing plants, rather than just re-selling. Do a bit of research to find them.

Hawthorn tends to be the main hedge species sold, but you can also choose plants to attract particular wildlife species, e.g. hazelnuts for dormice; or species that flower early, to provide nectar for bees when there's not much else around – cherry plums can flower in February. You can also plant food species like damson or plum.

For smallholders wanting stock-proof hedges, hawthorn grows quickly and has thorns, and blackthorn has suckers, which thicken the base of the hedge (less useful in urban settings as you could get suckers coming up in your lawn).

Roses can't be laid, but provide beauty and can fill in gaps and add bulk. Field maple is a classic hedge species; plus there's spindle for calcareous soil, and dogwood or willow for wetter areas. But you can use almost any species for hedging.

**Planting:** first prepare the area by clearing it of grass and weeds (which will take nutrients from the new hedge). Make a strip up to a metre wide, and keep it as weed-free as possible. Planting takes place in winter (as does laying), when the plants are dormant. Plant 5 plants per metre, typically in a double, staggered row – with c. 50cm between rows, although this can vary depending on how much space you have.

**Laying:** before laying your hedge, let it grow to c. 2 metres tall (3-5 years). Once it's laid, you can keep it in shape by trimming it, and then lay it again after maybe ten years. You can lay 10-20 metres per day, depending on the hedge's condition (and yours!). Laying a new hedge is easier than renovating an old one. With an old hedge, you might need a chainsaw, as the stems can be quite thick. With a new hedge you only need a billhook or a small axe or pruning saw. You'll also need a slasher for pulling out brambles etc., plus a mallet for styles with vertical stakes. Use secateurs to prune side shoots.



*Wildlife loves native hedges.*

Cut stems diagonally – almost all the way through as they're laid. It looks as though the hedge will die. But it doesn't. Smallholders might do a portion of their hedges each year, rather than trying to do it all at the same time. Plus if you use a contractor, it's best to spread the cost over several years.

Midland style: stems are laid at a 45 degree angle, often against vertical stakes, with horizontals to make a framework. This makes a strong, tall barrier for cattle. Hedges can be stock-proof immediately after laying, but it depends on the determination and strength of the stock. A hedge next to a fence will remain stock-proof long after the fence has gone.

If hedges aren't managed and laid, you'll end up with a line of small trees – which is fine if that's what you want – but it won't be stock-proof. You can leave some trees to grow out of the hedge; but big trees will shade and stunt the growth of the hedge around them.

You can plant a hedge around an urban garden, (including a 'fedge' – a cross between a fence and a hedge, made of living willow). Hedges are baffles rather than impervious windbreaks, so they don't blow over, as fence panels sometimes do. It takes time to grow, but if you plant a hedge next to an old fence, by the time the fence dies, the hedge will be there to take its place.

## resources

- [lowimpact.org/hedges](http://lowimpact.org/hedges) – for more info, links, contractors, courses, books, including:
- TCV, *Hedging: a Practical Handbook*
- Hugh Barker, *Hedge Britannica*
- John Wright, *a Natural History of the Hedgerow*
- [hedgelaying.org.uk](http://hedgelaying.org.uk), National Hedgelaying Soc.
- [Hedgelinek.org.uk](http://Hedgelinek.org.uk), conserving hedges

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