



Conserving Hedgerows



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HEGROWTH
CONSERVATION
SUPPORT

CONSERVING HEDGEROWS

A hedge usually consists of a row of shrubs or trees planted along the line of a man-made earth or stone bank. A ditch from which the bank material was excavated runs parallel to the hedge. Hedgerows are used to mark boundaries and to contain stock, they provide shelter from wind and facilitate drainage, and need continuous management in order to remain effective.

THE VALUE OF HEDGEROWS

Hedges are important heritage features. Varying greatly in form and species, they help to form the local and regional character of the landscape. Hedges are steep, fertile and well-drained soils are usually characterised by hawthorn and may have trees of ash, elm, sycamore or beech. Ditches or acid soils will give rise to gorse, while hedges on poorly drained land are likely to be dominated by willow. Ancient hedges are survivors of the moorland that covered the country before it became agricultural land, and have a particular conservation value as they often contain a richer variety of plant life than more recent hedges. Many of Ireland's hedgerow landscapes, as we know it today, were established between 1750 and 1850 as landless evicted tenants commuted to farm fields. Field boundaries are standing records of the area's history of land ownership and display evidence of local geology, local craftsmanship, and local farming practices. They show the work of many people those that established and maintained them, and those that built the rail stone pens or topped the wrought iron gates.

Hedgerows provide food and shelter for insects, birds and other animals, forming corridors that permit wildlife to move between habitats. As many birds and small mammals move between more than a few miles, from every population could become isolated and

vulnerable without hedges. Nearly two thirds of Ireland's bird species nest in hedges. In general, wide and high hedges with a broad diversity of plant species are the most beneficial to wildlife.

Hedges are durable. A properly maintained hedge will last for centuries, and is ultimately more cost effective than any alternative boundary. Hedges provide shelter from wind for stock, crops and road users. They also have the pleasing effects of low sun, filter dust and fumes, and absorb road noise. Hedges provide spring, relatively safe cross barriers beside roads and are more interesting visually for visitors and local travellers than stone or concrete boundaries; they are also more aesthetically local in character and can be used to shield unsightly fences. Mature flowering hedgerows, particularly of hawthorn, provide a strong visual impact on the countryside in early summer.



THREATS TO HEDGEROWS

- 1) Hedges need regular maintenance in order to provide effective boundary and shelter. Neglected hedges grow tall and gappy, so that they cease to function as effective barriers. A gappy hedge is less useful for wildlife and for farming.
- 2) Neglected hedges may become congested with brambles and other so that they resemble an thicket or scrubland and become inaccessible for maintenance.
- 3) Inappropriate management can damage hedges. This includes frequent (annual) cutting, and cutting during the bird nesting period.
- 4) Building developments in which all hedgerows are removed are a major threat to the hedgerow network.
- 5) Road widening programmes may threaten hedges. Although the removal of hedges may be necessary for public safety in many cases it is possible to preserve the original boundary by moving it back from the road to a safer position.



- 6) Disturbance of roadsides to lay and maintain services, such as telecommunications, drainage and water can cause disruption to hedgerow root systems, or hedges may be completely removed. This can be avoided with proper planning.
- 7) Poor roadside drainage can threaten hedges by raising their water tables. It is important to maintain drains, particularly to prevent discharge with plants.
- 8) Hedges may be removed for some there is a wish to open up views from roads in some areas. This is usually unnecessary if proper hedge maintenance is practiced.
- 9) Field enlargement is a threat to hedges. Farmers need to remove hedges in some cases, but should be encouraged to retain and maintain hedges, particularly along roadsides, as vital links in wildlife corridors.



PLANTING

- 1) When planting new hedges, drainage must be considered at the outset. A bank and ditch may be desirable.
- 2) It is important to leave sufficient width for the established hedge (2 m).
- 3) Young plants should be clearly spaced (50 cm maximum), and should be planted on a fence-line/digging line, not a straight line.
- 4) If at all possible, site all linking up with existing hedges to provide the most effective wildlife corridor.
- 5) It is important to use good quality plants. These should be native species already represented in hedgerows in the area. Care can advise on growing plants from locally sourced seeds or cuttings (see notes to below). Grow your hedge if established, after native species will colonise it.
- 6) New growth must be protected from weed competition until it is established.
- 7) Young hedges must be protected from browsing by livestock by fences at least 1 m away from the hedge on each side.
- 8) The young plants will need some clipping to encourage a good shape.

MAINTENANCE

Remember that the changes to hedging that bring both maintenance and management. Proper maintenance encourages flowering, bearing, ripening and stabilises colour. The age, maturity, composition, and climate of the hedgerow can limit what maintenance is possible. Hedging techniques in good condition continue almost to give naturally, with maintenance confined to specific practices such as deadwooding, reworking, and the removal of unwanted species. Most hedgerows, when done in the right way, will require little intervention such as laying or reworking. Hedgerows should be cut close to the ground, but not so close that they lose the stabilising and supporting qualities that have built them. Hedging should be done in a way that allows the hedgerow to recover from the stress of a good cut and regrow quickly – not one of the hedge that has become a pile.

Hedging should be done early before the winter to prevent conditions, frost, disease, and snow. The most suitable for cutting should be well developed, full, healthy, able to recover and fully root, and have good flower numbers. Hedging is required to be done in a way that allows the hedgerow to recover from the stress of a good cut and regrow quickly – not one of the hedge that has become a pile.

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