

Overview

Planting a hedgerow of native species is an easy and effective way of increasing the value of your garden for wildlife. It may also be possible to increase the number of native species in an existing hedgerow and therefore improve its value for wildlife. Suggested hedge plants include hazel, guelder rose, beech, field maple, hornbeam, cherry plum, dogwood, alder buckthorn and hawthorn. These should be mixed up when planted and will provide colour and interest for most of the year. Blackthorn and holly can be used if a spikey hedge is required, but are not recommended in areas where children play as their thorns or prickles can be very sharp. Blackthorn can also be quite invasive. Holly with its evergreen foliage and berries, beech which retains brown leaves in colder months and the stems of dogwood all provide winter colour. Hazel catkins appear very early in spring (February) followed by the white flowers of cherry plum before leaves start to develop. Other native hedge plants then have white flowers in succession: first blackthorn, then hawthorn, then dogwood and guelder rose. These 4 plants also provide berries for birds in autumn. For a list of hedge plants and further information about them see excel file. The ideal hedge has a thick base to provide shelter and protection for hedgehogs, shrews, bank voles and amphibians. The latter generally live most of their lives on land, only returning to ponds to breed. The bigger and thicker the hedge, the more wildlife it will support.



Hazel: catkins (left), leaves and nuts



Cherry Plum



Field Maple



Hawthorn



Guelder Rose: flowers (left)



How to Plant and Establish a Hedgerow for Wildlife

Use bare root whips of native species. These are quite inexpensive. They should be of local provenance (at least from Kent or south-east England) to reduce the risk of spreading plant diseases and because local invertebrates will be better adapted to them than plants from further away.

1. Ideally plant into bare soil. This isn't essential but reduces competition for the young plants.
2. Plant 4 to 5 whips per metre, in a double staggered row between November and March when the plants are dormant. Use a spade to make a slot and gently insert the shrub roots before heeling in to reduce the risk of air pockets and prevent frost harming the roots.
3. When planting, keep the roots covered until the last moment to protect them from drying out.
4. If you have enough room consider planting some additional whips which are allowed to grow into trees.

5. In the first spring cut back to 45-60cms to encourage bushy growth. Then trim lightly (in winter) the following year.
6. If you wish, you can gently weed around the base of the whips for the first 2 years, but this is not essential. In very dry weather it may be necessary to water hedge plants until they are well established.
7. Once the hedge is established long grass should be encouraged at its base, since this adds opportunities for a diversity of wildlife as well as protecting the base of the hedge plants and providing shelter and hibernation sites for animals such as hedgehogs.

How To Look After Established Wildlife Hedgerows

1. When the hedge is 2 years old try if possible to cut different aspects of the hedge in rotation as necessary e.g. Year 1: trim top, year 2: trim one side, Year 3: trim side of the hedge not previously trimmed. Then repeat this cycle. If this is not practical, just try to leave part of the hedge untrimmed each year because many spring flowering shrubs produce flowers & therefore fruit, on the previous year's growth and some insects overwinter as eggs laid on twigs in autumn.
2. Trim hedges between 31st November and 28th February (preferably in January or February) so that birds and animals can eat any fruit in autumn and nesting birds are not disturbed.
3. Try to avoid always cutting the top of the hedge at the same height to prevent a hard knuckle of wood forming at the trim line. The development of a trim line leads to mushroom shaped growth and gaps forming at ground level.
4. Allow native climbers such as white bryony and honeysuckle to weave through the hedgerow once it is well established.
5. Don't remove or cut grasses and other vegetation at hedge bases. This is a very important part of hedgerow habitat and will be home to many invertebrates, e.g. butterfly caterpillars as well as larger animals such as toads, slow worms, shrews, voles and hedgehogs. Toads and hedgehogs may hibernate here. If absolutely necessary, cut the herb layer adjacent to the hedge every other year in autumn/winter and remove dense cuttings. Leave the herb layer at least 4cm high and do not expose bare soil.
6. If your hedgerow is adjacent to a grassed area maintain an unmown buffer zone of 0.5m adjacent to the hedge. If you do need to cut this area, preferably cut by hand rather than strimming to avoid damaging the hedge plants and to prevent injury to mammals such as hedgehogs.
7. Consider planting native primroses, violets, foxgloves etc. adjacent to the hedge.
8. Do not use pesticides, fungicides or herbicides at hedge bases. Loss of vegetation at the hedge base severely restricts biodiversity and weakens hedgerow structure.
9. Think about growing native hedge plants from seed or cuttings to gap up hedgerow when necessary.