

## Top ten tips for a healthy hedge

### 1. **Keep it thick and dense**

Close interwoven branches in your hedge provide safe nesting and roosting places for small birds like thrushes, finches, robins, hedge sparrows and wrens. Open hedges tend to attract magpies, crows, pigeons and squirrels. Holly is a very good hedging plant, forming compact dense bushes that give excellent protection during the winter.

### 2. **Cut at the right time**

Leave trimming your hedge until late winter if you can. Hedgerow berries and other fruit provide vital food for birds like fieldfares, redwings and other thrushes throughout the winter. The earlier you cut, the less food will be available to help these birds and other wildlife survive through the most hostile time of year. And never cut during the bird breeding season (1 March to 31 August) unless you have to, for safety reasons.

### 3. **Don't cut too often or too tight**

Although cutting is necessary to keep a hedge thick, if it is cut back to the same point every year it will produce few flowers or berries. So try and cut just once every two or three years or each time let the hedge grow out and up a little. Another alternative is to cut just one side or the top each year. If you have to cut your hedge frequently, then try and leave occasional berry or fruit bearing trees to grow to maturity – one mature hawthorn can produce as many berries as 200 metres of hedge cut every year.

### 4. **Encourage native shrubs**

Shrubs that occur naturally in Britain provide habitat and food for far more insects and other animals than those introduced from abroad. If you can, include a range of different species to provide food throughout the year – willows and blackthorn for early season nectar; hawthorn, bramble and rose for summer flowers and autumn berries; ivy for autumn nectar and late winter berries.

### 5. **Encourage flowers and grasses at the base and margins**

Hedges with plenty of vegetation at the base support lots of wildlife. Flowers like primroses and knapweed provide nectar and pollen for bees and other beneficial invertebrates, while tussocky grasses provide safe places for beetles, spiders and the like during the winter. Frogs, toads, newts and lizards like dense growth at the base of hedgerows for food, cover and places to hibernate. The hedgehog likes thick cover too!

**6. Look after trees or plant new ones**

If you have room, big mature trees, especially native ones like oak, ash and beech, will increase the amount of wildlife that uses the hedge tremendously. Insects will congregate around the crown and beneath the canopy, providing rich feeding for birds and bats. Small trees, like holly, rowan and crab apple, are also very valuable, especially for their flowers and rich berry and fruit crops.

**7. Rejuvenating your hedge**

Hedges can be kept bushy for many years by cutting them occasionally, but eventually they will become open at the base. If this happens they need to be cut down close to ground level so they can send up a crop of new stems and begin a fresh cycle of healthy growth. (This won't work for conifers which do not re-grow when cut to the ground.)

**8. When establishing a new hedge, take care to plant suitable species**

Many hedge problems, including neighbour disputes, happen because fast-growing plants have been used for quick results, producing hedges that rapidly become too high and are difficult to maintain. Think carefully about why you want a hedge and about the site before choosing your shrubs and trees.

**9. Link the hedge with other wildlife habitats and fill in gaps**

Many creatures avoid crossing open spaces because they it makes them vulnerable to predators. If your hedge is linked to other hedges, or to a woodland or pond, it will provide safe passage for wildlife to move through both rural and urban landscapes. Bats and dormice are among many creatures that dislike even small gaps.

**10. Explore your hedge**

Do keep a close eye on your hedge and see what lives in it, and what parts of the hedge are most favoured by the wildlife you want to attract. You can then tailor your management accordingly. Keep a record of the species you see.