

HEDGE MANAGEMENT

The Chiltern Hills were designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1965 in recognition that they are one of the finest landscapes in England and Wales. This leaflet, part of the Chilterns Landowners' Guide, is intended to provide you with some basic information to help you maintain and enhance the natural beauty of your local landscape.

Why manage hedges?

Hedgerows are very important for wildlife and landscape and need managing appropriately. Hedges were originally planted using locally occurring shrubs, and managed to contain livestock before the widespread introduction of fencing. Without regular management, hedge plants will eventually grow into trees and will no longer be stockproof.

A minimum margin of 2m measured from the centre, should be left under the hedgerow as a wildlife refuge with the only management being to cut unwanted woody growth. Choice of management depends on several factors and the information given below will help you decide which is most appropriate.



An unmanaged hedgerow

Trimming

- Using a tractor-mounted flail has become the most common method of managing hedgerows today.
- Advantages include speed and low costs but if done unsympathetically can be very damaging to the hedge.
- Careful trimming encourages bushy, branching growth helping to form a dense barrier, good for nesting birds.
- Flailing is most effective on stems up to 25mm (1 inch) in diameter.
- Large stems may be within the flail's stated capacity but are often shattered, shortening the hedge's life.
- Such damage also occurs when the machine is pulled through the hedge too quickly.
- Manual cutting and the use of tractor mounted circular saws avoid the damage that flailing can cause.

What shape should my hedge be cut into?



The 'A' shaped hedge



The topped 'A' hedge

Hedges inevitably thin at the base, losing their attractive appearance and stockproof ability after continued trimming.

Trimming the hedge into an A shape up to 2m high and 1.5 m wide rather than the traditional box cross section encourages bushy growth from the base of the hedge and prolongs its life.

Topping the A shape looks more natural.

How do I access machinery and users?

Many farmers have their own hedge-cutters. If you only have a small section of hedge a friendly chat with a farming neighbour may result in them cutting it for you.

There are many contractors who can coppice and lay hedges for you. Contact the Conservation Board office for more information.

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Chilterns

an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

When and how often should it be cut?

- Trim between October and end of February to minimise disturbance to wildlife.
- Leaving until January or February will allow wildlife access to fruit and berries when other food is scarce.
- Annual cutting of a hedge is not recommended. It weakens the shrubs and reduces winter food for wildlife.
- Work on rotation, cutting once every 2 to 3 years. This saves money, benefits wildlife and produces a more natural looking hedge.



Berries, which only form on old wood, provide food for wildlife in winter

- Cutting alternate sides of hedge each year is another option.
- By raising the cutter bar a few cm each cut, and pruning back hard to the original starting point the third time round, unsightly scarring of the stems is prevented and stronger, denser growth is encouraged.
- Allow random plants i.e. oak or ash to develop into hedgerow trees by marking them so they are not trimmed.

Under section 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 it is an offence to intentionally damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird whilst it is being used or built. This rules out most hedge or tree works between 1 March and 1 September.

Coppicing

- Involves cutting the trees and shrubs down to a few cm above ground level to rejuvenate a dilapidated hedgerow.
- Encourages rapid new bushy growth and should be carried out on a 10-15 year cycle or longer if combined with periodic machine trimming.
- Re-growth should be protected from browsing animals including deer and rabbits.
- To reduce the temporarily detrimental effect on landscape and wildlife it is best done in rotation with no more than 100-150m coppiced in any one year.
- Please note that hedgerows containing very old hawthorn might not respond to coppicing. If in doubt please consult the Conservation Board, number below.
- Once re-grown the hedge can be trimmed; or laid then trimmed, or coppiced on rotation.



*Laying a mature hedge
Tina Stallard/ Countryside Agency*

Hedgelaying

- A traditional and skilled operation used to manage hedgerows required for stock retention.
- Hedgelaying involves partially severing the main stems (or pleacher) at the base and bending them over to be secured by weaving between stakes.
- New growth sprouts from the pleacher forming an attractive, thick and healthy, stockproof hedge. Work should be carried out when the sap has fallen, between October and the end of February.
- Hedges generally need re-laying on a 15-20 yr cycle with no other management other than trimming.
- Ideal hedges for laying are where stems are 5-10cm (2-4") thick and the hedge is 2-3.5m (6-12ft) high.
- Initial cost can be high due to the skilled nature of the job, but as with coppicing, the rotation period can be extended up to 50 years with sympathetic trimming.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION,
PLEASE CONTACT**

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