

# Hedgerow Cutting and Maintenance



Example of a poorly managed hedge - the lower section is bare!

## Avoid cutting all your hedges each year

The yearly average hedgerow machine cutting costs is often around £2,000 – 3,000 on farms. But why incur this expense? Out of habit - we've done it for years like this! We want them to look neat and tidy, so the neighbours don't criticise!

However, some of the disadvantages of continuous annual cutting include:

- Cutting to the same trim line each year causes the hedge stem health to deteriorate, losing lower branches, then becoming 'leggy' with gaps at the base, which lessens their benefits for livestock shelter, shade and providing a biosecurity barrier. They also become more susceptible to disease.
- When hedges are cut to the same width and height year after year, fewer flowers and fruit are produced and the food available for wildlife is reduced. Many of Britain's native berry bearing species only flower on growth that is two years or older. 84% of Britain's farmland birds for example, rely on hedgerows for their food, and need a thick dense hedge for nesting, roosting and sheltering in.

- More machinery travelling on the field margins and headlands alongside hedgerows just adds to soil compaction, which reduces soil fertility, water absorption and leads to faster water run-off.



An example of a dense and healthy hazel hedge

- All published good practice hedgerow management guidance encourages you not to cut all your hedges every year. The best approach is to have a diversity of hedgerow sizes across the farm, at different stages in their management life-cycle.
- Leave a proportion uncut where they provide the best habitat and don't affect crop production, or a road or public right of way. For others, cut just them on one side every 2 – 3 years, as supported by the Sustainable Farming Incentive payments.
- Clearly roadside hedges often have to be cut to avoid affecting driver's visibility or lane width. But can you leave the hedgerow on the field side, or if the roadside verge is wide, leave uncut for a season or two?



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## How and when to cut?

- Ensure any machinery blades are sharp so they are cut efficient and do less damage the hedge stems.
- Cut in a slight 'A' shape so the base is wider than the top. This allows light to get to the lower branches.
- Trimming slightly higher and wider each year is known as incremental cutting, ie. trimming about 10-15cm higher and wider than the previous trim line. This can extend the time cycle for when the hedgerow needs to be laid again, reducing your capital labour cost for such laying. An added benefit is avoiding creating a hard thick 'knuckle', which puts strain on cutting flail machinery (you can feel this in the tractor cab).
- The timing of hedge cutting is also hugely important for wildlife. No hedge should be cut in bird nesting season between March and the beginning of September. Ideally, leave trimming until January or February, so that hedgerow fruit/nuts are available for wildlife through the autumn and winter months.



Hedge regrowth where the trim line is visible

## Any Questions?

### Get in touch:

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For more information  
about our hedgerow work,  
scan the QR code or see  
our website:



A large mature oak tree inside a hedge

## Trees in hedgerows

- In terms of wildlife habitat and landscape character, trees in hedgerows are equally important to protect and maintain. Before hedge trimming is done, mark any smaller developing trees that the contractor may not spot.
- Aim for a balance of both old, mature hedgerow trees that provide valuable deadwood habitat, and young trees that will become the mature hedgerow trees of the future. New young trees can be established by selecting suitable straight-growing stems already present in the hedge line layer of a hedge and not cutting or laying these when the hedge is next cut or rejuvenated.

