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hedgerow management

a practical guide

why hedgerows?

Walk through almost any part of Britain and you'll find them: the quiet, twisting lines that stitch our fields together. Hedgerows are so familiar that we barely notice them — until they're gone. Yet these living boundaries are among the most hardworking, ecologically valuable, and culturally significant features in our landscape. They shelter livestock, feed birds through winter, slow the wind across open fields, hold soil in place, and guide wildlife safely across farmland.

In many ways, they are the countryside's circulatory system — the blood vessels of the land that sustain life — and their decline has been one of the great unnoticed losses of the last century (Tree Council, 2024).

This guide blends practical steps with scientific evidence to help you understand, plant, manage, and rejuvenate hedgerows in a way that supports horses, wildlife, and land resilience.

what is a hedgerow?

A hedgerow is a linear strip of shrubs, trees, ground flora, and associated features such as banks and ditches. Ecologically, it functions as a miniature woodland edge — a habitat type once widespread across Britain before agricultural intensification simplified the landscape (Montgomery, Caruso & Reid, 2020).

Hedgerows occupy a transitional space: neither woodland nor open field, but something in between. These "edge habitats" are disproportionately rich in biodiversity because they offer shelter, food, and structural complexity (García de León et al., 2021).

They act as:

- nesting sites for birds
- foraging routes for bats
- overwintering habitat for insects
- movement corridors for mammals

Historically, hedgerows marked boundaries, divided fields, and contained livestock. A well-laid hedge remains one of the safest, most resilient stock barriers available today.

Edge habitats are biodiversity hotspots

They combine the shelter of woodland with the sunlight and warmth of open fields. This creates a mosaic of microclimates — warm, cool, damp, dry, shaded, exposed — all within a few metres.

Species that prefer woodland edges, scrub, grassland margins, or transitional zones all overlap here.

This is why hedgerows support far more wildlife than their size suggests — they are the "in-between" places where ecological richness concentrates.

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the decline of hedgerows - and why it matters

Since the Second World War, Britain has lost around 50% of its hedgerows (Tree Council, 2024). Many were removed to enlarge fields, but many more have simply declined in condition.

Drivers of decline include:

- annual flailing at the same height
- neglect and lack of rejuvenation
- loss of hedge-laying skills
- development and road building
- removal for field enlargement

what is knuckling?

Repeated cutting at the same height creates swollen, dead "knuckles" of wood.

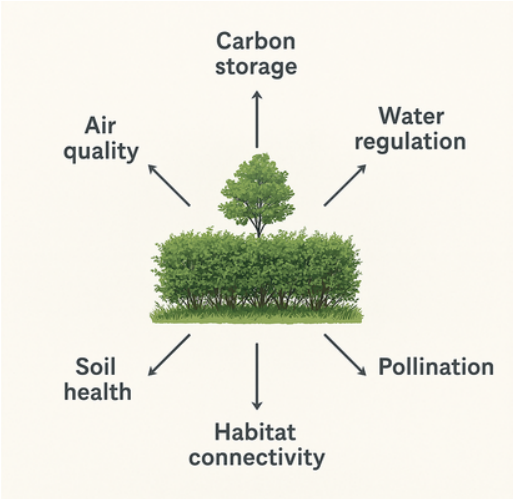
The hedge stops producing new shoots and begins to die back (Staley et al., 2015).

Only around half of remaining hedgerows are in "favourable condition" (Norton et al., 2024).

Simple improvements that transform hedge health

- Trim every 2–3 years
- Cut in a gentle A-shape
- Raise cutting height gradually
- Avoid cutting March–September

the benefits of hedgerows for ecosystem services



Hedgerows provide:

Carbon storage

Hedgerow soils store more carbon than adjacent fields (Lewis et al., 2019).

Water regulation

Hedges slow runoff, reduce erosion, and improve infiltration (Montgomery et al., 2020).

Air quality

Dense foliage filters particulates and ammonia (García de León et al., 2021).

Pollination & pest control

Hedgerows support pollinators and beneficial insects (Merckx & Pereira, 2015).

Soil health

They reduce wind erosion and create sheltered microclimates (Thomas et al., 2020).

Habitat connectivity

They act as wildlife corridors (Wolton et al., 2014).

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why hedgerows matter for horses

Hedgerows provide:

- shelter from wind, rain, and sun
- windbreaks that reduce stress and energy expenditure
- natural browse that supports gut health
- environmental enrichment
- reduced mud through improved drainage
- safe, natural stock barriers

A well-structured hedge is one of the most valuable features you can add to a paddock.

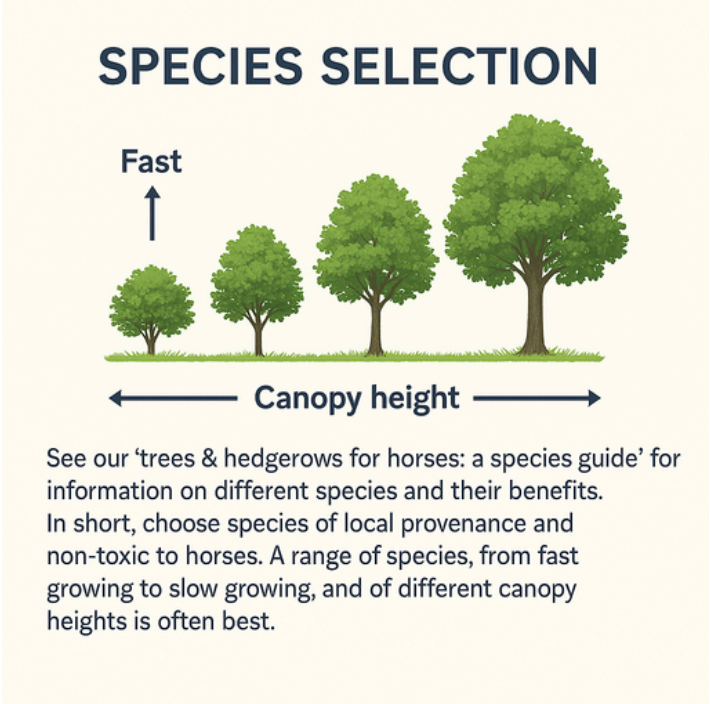
what a healthy hedge looks like

A resilient hedge has:

- a dense, bushy base
- a gentle A-shape
- mixed species and ages
- occasional hedgerow trees
- layered vegetation
- a bank or ditch where possible

key takeaway

A hedge does not need to be neat to be healthy. Taller, wider, less frequently cut hedges support far more wildlife.



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where to put a hedge

Placement shapes performance.
Consider:

- prevailing wind
- water flow
- slopes and erosion
- shade and browse access
- wildlife connectivity
- machinery access

A hedge placed with purpose becomes part of a wider landscape system.

how to plant a new hedgerow

Best practice:

- Plant Nov–Mar
- Use mixed native species
- Double staggered row, 30–40 cm apart
- Include occasional trees
- Mulch and protect from grazing
- Formative trimming in years 2–3
- Avoid flailing until established

managing hedgerows over time

Routine management:

- Trim every 2–3 years
- Cut in an A-shape
- Raise cutting height gradually
- Allow berrying years
- Avoid nesting season (March - September)

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rejuvenation options

Even well-managed hedges eventually need deeper intervention.
Look for these signs to know when to rejuvenate:

- Gappy or open base
- Tall, leggy stems
- Loss of stock-proofing
- Repeated flailing at the same height
- Hedge starting to “tree up”

Natural England recommends rejuvenation every 8–15 years by one of two methods:

Hedge-laying
Restores density, structure, and stock-proofing (Staley et al., 2015).

Coppicing
Cuts stems to ground level to restart vigorous growth.
Both are best done in winter.

payments & funding

Under the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), payments are available for:

- assessing hedgerow condition
- managing for wildlife
- increasing height and width
- allowing berrying years
- laying or coppicing

Private nature markets are also emerging, including biodiversity credits and corporate nature investment.

common mistakes to avoid

- Annual flailing at the same height
- Cutting during nesting season
- Planting a single species
- Letting hedges become tree-like
- Planting too close to fences
- Assuming a hedge is “fine” because it’s green

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year-based hedge mangement

Year 0-3 Establishment Phase

Plant November - March
Use mixed native species of local provenance
Protect from grazing and browsing
Avoid flailing or hard trimming
Light formative trimming (if needed) years 2-3
Monitor for gaps or leggy stems

Year 4-10 Maintenance Phase

Trim every 2-3 years
Cut in gentle A shape
Raise cutting height and width gradually
Allow berrying years
Avoid nesting season trimming
Monitor hedge health
Prevent knuckling and dieback

Year 10-15 Rejuvenation Phase

Hedgelaying or coppicing in winter
Combine with gap-planting
Restart trimming cycle after regrowth
Rebuild structure and resilience

Year 15+ Long Term Stewardship

Continue 2-3 year trimming cycle
Rejuvenate every 8-15 years
Monitor wildlife use and strucutral integrity
Integrate into broader land planning

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