# trees & hedgerows for horses:
*a species guide*

Trees and hedgerows are more than boundaries or shade providers — they are living systems that support horse welfare, enhance agroecological resilience, and deliver vital ecosystem services. Choosing the right mix of species, combining quick-growing trees with slower-growing, long-lived species, creates diverse habitats that benefit horses, landowners, and the wider environment (Woodland Trust, 2025a; BHS, 2023).

## How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to help you choose tree and hedgerow species that support both horse welfare and land health. Each species entry includes:

**Equine benefits** – whether horses can browse it safely, and any welfare-related considerations.

**Agroecological role** – how the species supports soil health, water regulation, carbon storage, and wider land resilience.

**Ecosystem value** – the wildlife it supports and its contribution to biodiversity.

**Key notes** – practical management tips for equine settings.

**Toxicity** – clear guidance on which parts of the plant are safe or unsafe for horses. Toxicity often depends on the plant part and quantity consumed, so always monitor access and seasonal changes.

Use this guide to identify species that fit your land type, grazing system, and welfare goals. It is not exhaustive, and local conditions, provenance, and site-specific constraints should always be considered. For planting near horses, ensure young trees are protected and monitor access to any species with known toxic parts.

## hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*)

**Equine benefits**: Leaves and young shoots are palatable and aid digestion (BHS, 2023). Rich in flavonoids and fibre, supporting circulation and gut health (Annimally, 2025).

**Agroecological role:** Strong hedgerow plant that stabilises soil and tolerates poor conditions (Woodland Trust, 2025a). Its deep roots improve soil structure, reduce erosion, and contribute organic matter through leaf litter, supporting grassland recovery and productivity.

**Ecosystem value:** Excellent for birds (nesting, berries for winter food) and pollinators (Hedgelink, 2025). Provides connective routes for wildlife.

**Key notes:** Thorns can injure horses (and people!) if unmanaged.

**Toxicity:** Safe, Not known to be toxic to horses.





## blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*)

**Equine benefits:** Not recommended for direct browse due to sharp thorns.

**Agroecological role:** Adds diversity to hedgerows, stabilises boundaries, and improves soil structure through deep roots (Woodland Trust, 2025a). Provides shade and carbon storage.

**Ecosystem value:** Supports insects and birds; sloes provide autumn fruit. Dense thickets offer nesting and roosting sites.

**Key notes:** Sloes can be picked after the first frost to make sloe gin — just watch out for thorns.

**Toxicity:** Thorns hazardous; best avoided in paddocks.

## willow (*Salix* spp.)

**Equine benefits**: Highly palatable browse; bark contains salicin, a natural pain-relief compound (Treefluent, 2025). Provides fibre and trace minerals; mild anti-inflammatory properties (Agricology, 2025).

**Agroecological role**: Thrives in wet soils, regulates water flow, stabilises riverbanks, and reduces erosion (Woodland Trust, 2025b). Improves soil fertility and structure, supporting grassland recovery. Provides shade, improves air quality, and sequesters carbon.

**Ecosystem value**: Habitat corridors for invertebrates, nesting birds, and roosting bats.

**Key notes:** Fast-growing, ideal for quick shelter and waterlogged areas. Underplanting with shrubs and herbs maximises biodiversity.

**Toxicity:** Safe in moderation; excessive intake may cause digestive upset (Vet Advises, 2023).



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## hazel (*Corylus avellana*)

**Equine benefits:** Safe browse; horses enjoy branches and leaves. Provides woody fibre supporting digestive health (Woodland Trust, 2025a).

**Agroecological role:** Coppice species that improves soil fertility and structure. Provides shade, carbon storage, and contributes organic matter.

**Ecosystem value:** Supports dormice, insects, and birds. Catkins provide early pollen for bees.

**Key notes:** Quick-growing species traditionally managed through coppicing. Works well in hedgerows. Horses love it!

**Toxicity:** Safe for horses.

## alder (*Alnus glutinosa*)

**Equine benefits:** Limited browse, safe. Provides woody fibre; not a major nutrient source (Treefluent, 2024).

**Agroecological role:** Nitrogen-fixing species that enriches soil fertility (Woodland Trust, 2025b). Thrives in wet soils, stabilises waterlogged ground, and improves conditions for grassland recovery. Provides shade, carbon storage, and improves air quality.
**Ecosystem value:** Supports aquatic ecosystems, provides connective habitats for birds and insects.

**Key notes:** Valuable in flood-prone areas.

**Toxicity:** Safe for horses.





## beech (*Fagus sylvatica*)

**Equine benefits:** Leaves occasionally browsed. Beech nuts can be mildly toxic in large quantities; leaves provide fibre (Treefluent, 2024).

**Agroecological role:** Long-lived tree that stabilises soil, provides shade, and sequesters carbon. Dense canopy reduces wind exposure but can suppress ground flora.

**Ecosystem value:** Supports fungi, invertebrates, and birds. Provides roosting sites for bats.

**Key notes:** Beech woodlands often have little ground flora due to dense shade.

**Toxicity:** Toxicity is dose-dependent; monitor nut fall.

## hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*)

**Equine benefits:** Safe browse, shelter. Provides woody fibre; not a major nutrient source.

**Agroecological role:** Hardy species that tolerates poor soils, stabilises ground, and contributes organic matter. Provides shade, carbon storage, and improves air quality.

**Ecosystem value:** Supports insects and birds.

**Key notes:** Good alternative species to beech, with similar ecological functions but less shade impact.

**Toxicity:** Safe.





## silver Birch (*Betula pendula*)

**Equine benefits:** Leaves browsed occasionally; horses often self-select birch leaves. Rich in flavonoids, tannins, potassium, and vitamin C; mild diuretic and anti-inflammatory properties (MadBarn, 2025; askHELTIE, 2025).

**Agroecological role**: Pioneer species that improves soil fertility and structure. Provides shade, carbon storage, and contributes organic matter.

**Ecosystem value**: Supports insects, fungi, and birds. Creates connective habitats.

**Key notes:** Quick-growing, useful for early habitat creation.

**Toxicity:** Safe in moderation.

## sea Buckthorn (*Hippophae rhamnoides*)

**Equine benefits:** Berries are highly nutritious; linked to improved coat and vitality (Equinutritive, 2020). Extremely rich in vitamin C, omega oils (including omega-7), antioxidants, and carotenoids (MadBarn, 2025).

**Agroecological role**: Tolerates sandy soils, stabilises dunes, and improves soil fertility. Provides shade, carbon storage, and contributes organic matter.

**Ecosystem value:** Supports birds and insects; berries provide winter food. Dense thickets offer nesting sites.

**Key notes:** Hardy shrub, useful in exposed sites. Underplanting with herbs enhances biodiversity.

**Toxicity:** Safe, but thorns hazardous.





## elder (*Sambucus nigra*)

**Equine benefits:** Leaves and bark toxic; berries safe when ripe. Ripe berries contain antioxidants and vitamins, but should not be a primary equine feed (Treefluent, 2024). Produces aromatic compounds with natural insect repellent properties, which may offer supportive benefits for horses prone to sweet itch by reducing exposure to nuisance insects.

**Agroecological role:** Fast-growing gap-filler that improves soil fertility through leaf litter. Provides shade, carbon storage, and improves air quality.

**Ecosystem value:** Supports insects, birds, fungi.

**Key notes:** Useful gap-filler in hedgerows, but manage carefully.

**Toxicity:** Avoid equine access to leaves/bark. Berries safe when ripe.

## walnut (*Juglans regia*)

**Equine benefits**: Not browsed directly by horses, but improves soil nutrient balance, indirectly supporting pasture quality (Mortier et al., 2022).

**Agroecological role:** Deep-rooted tree that draws up minerals and redistributes nutrients to the surface. Enhances soil fertility and supports grassland recovery, helping maintain productivity even where land is partly wooded. Provides shade, carbon storage, and improves air quality.

**Ecosystem value:** Provides roosting cavities for bats and birds. High-value timber species.

**Key notes:** Slower-growing but long-lived. Works well in mixed planting schemes.

**Toxicity:** Generally safe, though fallen husks should be monitored to avoid mould.



# species to avoid

**Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*)** — seeds cause atypical myopathy, often fatal (Horse & Hound, 2015). Best avoided.

**Yew (*Taxus baccata*)** — highly toxic. Small amounts can be fatal.

**Oak (*Quercus robur*)** — contains high tannins, especially in acorns. Small amounts may have anthelmintic properties, but large quantities can cause liver damage. Toxicity varies between individuals, so not favoured for equine land.

**Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*)** — not toxic, but prone to ash dieback in the UK. Not recommended for planting.

# notes on planting



When selecting species for equine land, always consider your local conditions, including soil type, drainage, topography, elevation, climate and exposure. These factors influence establishment success, water movement, microclimates, and where shelter or shade will be most effective. Where possible, choose locally native or locally sourced plants to support regional biodiversity and long-term ecological resilience.

Toxicity can vary by plant part and by season, so monitor equine access throughout the year and be aware of changes in palatability during drought, frost, or leaf fall. Some species are safe only in moderation, while others have toxic leaves, bark, or seeds; always refer back to the species notes for guidance.

Young trees should be protected with guards or fencing until established. Horses may browse growth tips, and other species such as deer and rabbits may ring-bark young stems, so early protection is essential for long-term success.

A resilient planting scheme combines quick-growing pioneer species (such as willow, alder, birch) with slower-growing, long-lived trees (such as hornbeam, beech, walnut). This mix creates structure, shelter, and ecological stability while supporting nutrient cycling and long-term pasture resilience.

Planting trees and hedgerows should not be seen as a loss of grazing land. When well-designed, they can increase pasture productivity by improving soil fertility, regulating water, reducing wind exposure, and creating microclimates that support healthier, more resilient grassland.

To maximise ecological value, consider underplanting with shrubs and herb layers — such as dogwood, guelder rose, wild mint, or meadowsweet — to create a multi-tiered habitat. This layered approach enhances biodiversity, stabilises soils, and provides additional forage and enrichment opportunities for horses.

For guidance on long-term hedgerow care, trimming cycles, and wildlife-sensitive management, refer to our **Hedgerow Management Guide.**

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