

HEDGING YOUR BETS

Planting a row of trees in very close proximity and then cutting them to form rectangular cuboids seems, when put like this, a very artificial thing to do, but the hedges that result from this practice form an integral part of our countryside and gardens.

Traditionally, hedges were planted along the boundaries of fields and gardens to keep livestock in or out, but hedges are not only useful for this purpose; they also provide windbreaks for crops, food in the way of nuts and berries for humans and wildlife alike, shelter and nesting sites for wildlife and, from a garden design perspective, have a number of invaluable functions. Hedges can be used to screen eyesores, create divisions in a garden, act as a neutral backdrop to a colourful grouping of flowering plants or a specimen shrub, add mystery and intrigue to a space by hiding certain areas and provide a bit of fun if planted to form a maze.



The type of hedge you choose to plant will depend on its use and location. Mixed native species hedges of hawthorn, blackthorn and hazel are appropriate for boundary hedges in rural locations, but some species hedges of holly, beech or hornbeam can also work well in this situation. In towns, privet or cherry laurel have long been the favoured plants to use because of their ability to tolerate air pollution. For dividing areas within a garden, box, or its new substitute Japanese holly, are

exemplary, but the most superlative of hedging materials, in my view, is yew. When cut crisply, yew has the texture of velvet which is unsurpassed as a backdrop to most other garden plants. Yew can also be clipped into a multitude of shapes and billows making it very versatile. Often conifers and, in particular, Leyland cypress, are planted as hedges for screening or to serve as wind and noise breaks. Conifers have their uses, but careful consideration should be given before planting them. Fast growing conifers need to be maintained regularly to keep them within bounds and they should not be planted in small gardens where they will blot out the neighbour's light. The degree of maintenance that will be required is an important consideration when choosing a hedge. With the exception of fast growing plant species (which includes Leylandii) an annual cut in July or August (when the birds have finished nesting) is usually sufficient for most hedge types with, possibly, a quick trim again in autumn if a neat and tidy look is preferred over the winter months.

Now is a good time to plant a hedge for whatever purpose it is required. A wide range of bare rooted and root-balled hedging plants become available this month and planting them at the beginning of winter ensures there is time for the plants to establish before the drier months of spring and summer arrive.

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