

Who doesn't like a tidy hedge?

What do you think of when you think about how we might solve the climate crisis? Do you think of hedges? Possibly not, but, like trees, a healthy hedge is a very good carbon sink, removing CO₂ from the atmosphere and storing it in the structure of its roots and branches. The healthier and larger the hedge the more CO₂ it will remove, hedges are, after all basically a community of trees and shrubs.

Not only does a big, blossomy hedgerow look beautiful but it provides an essential place to live and eat to a huge variety of wildlife including many species that are under threat today due to climate change and habitat loss. Hedgerows are important features in the landscape and need managing sympathetically.



Mature hedgerows home for nesting birds and pollinating insects.

In the past, hedges would have been managed by laying or coppicing and indeed, there are still parts of the local area where you can see this being done today. There are advantages to this, not only reducing the need for expensive machinery and labour every single year, but also a laid hedge can be stock proof and won't need laying again for another 15-20 years. Laying a hedge isn't as hard as it looks (there are YouTube videos to help you if you fancy having a go), and coppicing (cutting off the shrubs at ground level) is even simpler. Whilst it looks savage, coppicing and laying are both great for wildlife once the hedge has recovered - which doesn't take as long as you might think - as well as keeping the hedge healthy ensuring that essential carbon capture processes continue.

Hedge maintenance these days is usually done by flail trimming, often annually to the top and both sides of the hedge but too frequent flailing can weaken the hedge and destroy the habitat of insect species which over-winter as eggs or cocoons on twigs. The farming and wildlife advisory group (FWAG) advocates cutting of hedgerows in alternate years and the NFU too has advised members that hedgerows should be allowed to grow bigger and taller to support more wildlife. Some common hedge species only flower on the second-year growth so annual cutting severely reduces the amount of blossom available for pollinating insects and the subsequent berry crop for birds; it also risks weakening the shrubs and causing disease. Of course, some hedgerows close to roads and farm access tracks may have

to be trimmed annually to avoid obstruction but in general, cutting hedges every 2-3 years and cutting alternate sides, saves fuel, benefits wildlife and produces a more natural hedge with plenty of blossom.

You may have noticed that hedges can often be punctuated by individual trees which loom over them like someone standing up whilst everyone else is sitting down. These are known as standards. Many of our veteran trees have come about this way and if future generations are also to have the benefit of enjoying these amazing wildlife and carbon repositories then we need to continue this practice to provide replacement trees of different ages. From today's bendy saplings will eventually come tomorrow's mighty oaks.



Intensively managed hedges in the levels



Standard trees being allowed to thrive.

Recent research has shown that planting new hedgerows is one of the best if not the only ways to combat ecosystem fragmentation, and as the climate crisis escalates, they are expected to become even more important as their deep roots sequester carbon. Hedges also reduce the likelihood of flooding downstream, suck nutrients and pollutants out of water and prevent soil erosion, all things that are all close to our heart in Stoke St Gregory. In February 2021, the National Botanic Garden of Wales pointed out that the UK needs more old-fashioned flower-filled hedgerows and grasslands to help boost declining populations of bees and other pollinators.



Flower filled hedge.



Severely cut hedges may have gaps and provide limited cover or food for wildlife.

Hedgerows are strongly protected under the 1997 hedgerow regulations but currently only 1 in 3 hedgerows in England is in good condition. The main issues, leading to loss of wildlife, gaps, and reduction in the ability of hedges to sequester carbon, are their being cut too severely and too frequently and nutrient enrichment from chemicals too close to the hedge.

At a time when combating climate change by tree planting is in the news every day shouldn't we let our incredible resource of countryside hedges become more natural, does it matter if some eventually turn into lines of trees? Liking to see things tidy is a common reaction but what if tidiness comes at a cost and isn't always the answer? Who doesn't like a tidy hedge? Birds, butterflies, bees, and other pollinators don't. Give me a messy, blossomy, bushy hedge full of butterflies, birds, and bees any day.



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1 Peacock Butterflies on Blackthorn