

Hedging it in



This week Lynn O'Keeffe explores the world of hedges in her gardening column which answers your common conundrums

Hedges are a part of every garden. They bring security, privacy, provide shelter from winds, and add beauty to the garden.

They can screen off something like an oil tank or an ugly view. Their flowers and fruits can offer nectar, pollen and food to pollinators and insects, as well as offering nesting sites to many garden species of bird.

We tend to assume that birds all nest in tree tops, but many small garden birds nest quite low down and prefer dense shrubby growth like you find in hedges.

Winter is the best time to plant most hedges. You can source good plants bare root online or in garden centres for less than they cost potted. Buying bare root means plants have a good root system that hasn't been confined to a pot, they're also peat free and plastic free.

They establish well being planted while dormant in winter and soon put out strong growth come spring.

There are a few things to consider when deciding what hedging plants will suit your particular garden

SLOW GROWING HEDGING GROW SLOWLY

That might sound obvious, but what it means is they are slow to fill out into a solid hedge, but will require a lot less annual trimming. They are also more expensive to buy. An example is yew or box.

FAST GROWING HEDGING

Fast growing hedging is cheap to buy, fills out fast and then you spend a lifetime trying to keep it under control, like the ubiquitous Laurel or Leylandii.

Most other hedging options fall

somewhere in between.

EVERGREEN OR DECIDUOUS?

Evergreen hedging gives year-round privacy, screening and shelter. A flowery example that is not too slow to grow is winter flowering Viburnum tinus. Deciduous hedges are some of the most floriferous hedges but lose their leaves in winter, like fuchsia. You can give them a good hard prune in winter and then let them off all summer to flower again. An in between option is Beech, which while it is deciduous, it holds onto the dry brown leaves all winter.

MIXED HEDGING OR A HEDGEROW

Does your hedge really need to be uniform? By mixing types you get different flowers and fruits, can attract many different types of insects and birds, and create an informal natural feel to a garden.

This is most suitable along a boundary with a field or roadside. Hedgerow species that can be cut as a hedge include native trees like Hawthorn, Elder, Hazel, Guelder Rose, and then other non-natives such as Beech and Fuchsia. If you can let it grow out into a taller hedgerow, you could also include Crab Apple and Damsons for fruit.

A mixed hedgerow can also be purely ornamental with species such as Rosa rugosa, the flowering Currant, Forsythia and Hydrangea. Some nurseries offer suitable hedging mixes specific to different locations, such as exposed sites or wet soil.

A WORD ABOUT BOX HEDGING

This slow growing evergreen hedging plant has been the classic choice for low formal hedges for centuries. However, we now have



A native hedge with Hawthorn can look lovely and be great for wildlife in summer and autumn

Box blight throughout Ireland, which leaves unsightly bald or brown patches. There are treatments with limited efficacy and as a slow-growing hedge, Box is slow to recover. I wouldn't be in a rush to plant any new Box hedging at the moment.

So think about whether you want to go fast and high maintenance or slow and steady. Do you need to have an evergreen hedge or would deciduous do? Measure up the length and check for sun or shade. Then pick a few possible types and cost it out. A short hedge could be done with mature expensive plants, a long length of hedge might only be affordable with hundreds of 'whips' i.e. little 2 year old plants.

PLANTING BY A WALL

It is important to come out a

distance from the wall, say 40-50cm for two reasons. One, walls often have a concrete foundation at the base and that won't grow a good hedge. Second for a hedge to not subsequently fall forward it needs balanced growth both on top and underground in the roots. So plant well out from the wall.

PREPARE THE GROUND

Remove weeds and grass. Planting through a plastic membrane will help with weeding in the beginning, but ultimately can strangle plants as they grow, and means you can't mulch or feed the hedge later on.

The plastic ends up in the soil, or fraying and going into the wider environment. We need to start thinking about reducing our dependence on plastic in the garden. There are some

biodegradable replacements made from hemp or jute coming onto the market, or a thick covering of bark mulch helps with weeds too.

For many small plants or whips dig a trench, for larger pot grown plants you can just dig individual holes. If you have poor soil, consider adding a slow release shrub fertiliser, compost from the compost heap or well-rotted manure if you have it. But most soils should grow a hedge fine without fertiliser. Water well after planting and again the following summer in any dry spell.

Keep the height short till the width fills in, in the first few years. Only let it get taller when the hedge is solid.

TOP TIP

If you're worried about security choose a thorny hedge like Pyracantha or Hawthorn which can keep out unwanted visitors and are also great for wildlife.

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Box blight on a Box hedge



Hypericum makes a great flowery hedge for shade