All About Hedgerows

What is a Hedgerow?

A hedgerow is a linear boundary comprised of woody species, i.e. trees or shrubs, along with its associated features, i.e. ditches, banks, walls or verges.

Hedgerows are a man-made habitat, traditionally having been planted by people to mark out boundaries between properties and enclose livestock in fields.
They are living fences!

However, despite them being a “man-made” habitat, they are extremely valuable for our wildlife. In fact, species-rich hedgerows are a Northern Ireland priority habitat, meaning they should be protected or replaced if removed.

Why are Hedgerows Important?

Our wildlife in Northern Ireland is in trouble.
Approximately 12% of our species are threatened with extinction and we are the 12th worst country in the world for biodiversity.

The primary driving factor for this is habitat change or loss. By creating new and connected green spaces for our wildlife we can help to reduce the impacts of the threats they are facing.

Hedgerows are one such green space that we can introduce across our country to support our wildlife.
Hedgerows can provide the following wildlife support:

Providing food

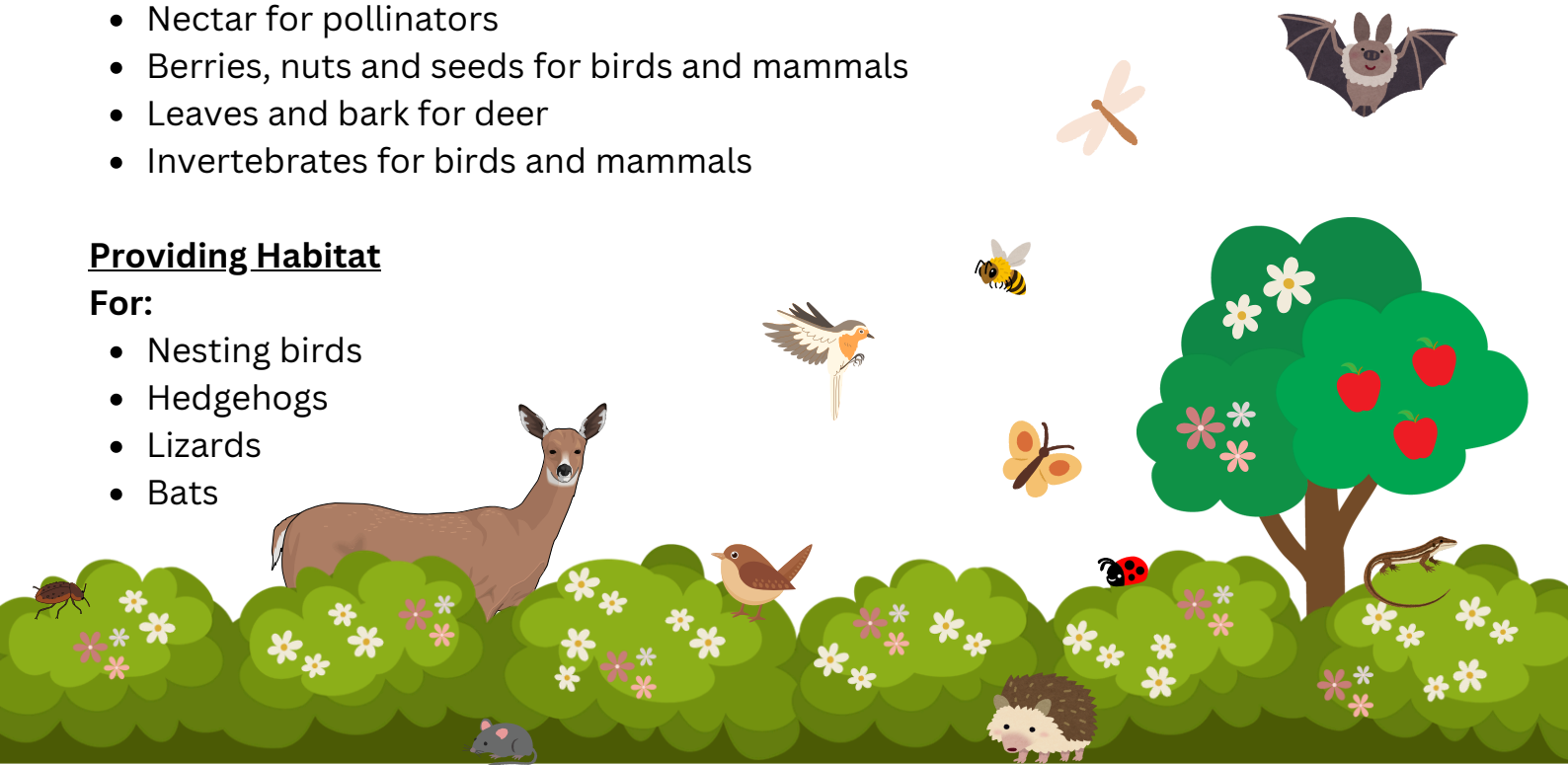
For example:

- Nectar for pollinators
- Berries, nuts and seeds for birds and mammals
- Leaves and bark for deer
- Invertebrates for birds and mammals

Providing Habitat

For:

- Nesting birds
- Hedgehogs
- Lizards
- Bats



Weather Protection

For example:

- Shade
- Wind break
- Water level and flood control

Carbon Storage

Not only are hedges composed of woody tree and shrub species that absorb carbon from our atmosphere, but they have also been shown to help the surrounding grasslands hold more carbon by increasing soil moisture and reducing the temperature under the hedge.

They are important features in the fight against climate change!

Pollution Prevention

- Water pollutants - hedges slow the flow of water and trap chemicals that may otherwise enter our waterways
- Air pollutants - leaves on hedges can trap small airborne pollutants and help to clean our air
- Soil erosion - hedge roots can help to stablise the soil surface and their presence can also reduce surface wind speeds, meaning surrounding areas experience less soil erosion

Wildlife Corridors

This is a really important feature of hedgerows - although they are a valuable habitat in their own right, they are vital corridors that connect up other wild areas and green spaces.

Certain creatures will use hedgerows to navigate across large spaces, for example:

- Bats
- Field mice
- Lizards
- Newts
- Hedgehogs

Threats Facing Hedgerows

Hedgerows are threatened by the expansion of urban and agricultural landscapes.

Traditionally, agricultural land would be a haven for hedgerows, with traditional farming methods supporting species-rich hedges.

However, with the intensification of farming methods and more pressure on farmers than ever before to produce more food, they are unable or unwilling to implement sustainable management of hedgerows.

Similarly, in urban areas, non-native and single-species hedges are being prioritised in gardens as they are easier to manage. These are of very low value for biodiversity.

In summary, some of the main threats to species-rich native hedgerows are:

- Increased stocking rates (leading to damage)
- Neglect and poor management
- Use of chemicals (herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers)
- Removal for expansion or development
- Planting of “low-maintenance”, non-native, single-species hedges

Native vs Non-native

One of the threats mentioned above is the replacement of native hedges with non-native hedges. But what does that mean?

Native plants are plants that have originated on the island of Ireland - they have always been here and have evolved and adapted alongside our native wildlife.

Non-native plants have simply originated elsewhere. They have usually been introduced to Northern Ireland by humans, whether it be for horticultural or ornamental purposes or accidentally.

Non-native plants will compete with our native plants for resources and space. They often come from places with harsher climates, so will do really well here in Northern Ireland where it is mild and moist - perfect conditions for growing! These plants can sometimes harm our ecosystem by disrupting the delicate balance of our food webs.

The reason we want to encourage native plants in our wild spaces is because they are better for our wildlife and biodiversity.
They have co-evolved with our wildlife, meaning they provide the perfect food, shelter and resources for our species.
By having more native plant species in our habitats, we encourage a balanced and harmonious ecosystem and give our wildlife the best possible chance!

What Does a Healthy Hedge Look Like

A healthy hedge which encourages maximum biodiversity should have the following features:

- **Variety** - a wide range of species will provide resources for a wide range of wildlife.
- **Native** - planting only native species is vital to best support our wildlife.
- **Trees** - including some larger-growing trees and letting them mature will again provide that variety that nature loves.
- **Thick** - letting your hedge thicken anywhere from 1.5m to 5m will make it more attractive and useful to the creatures using it.
- **Plant growth** - keeping the grass long and allowing flowering species to grow up underneath and around your hedge will encourage even more species to use it.

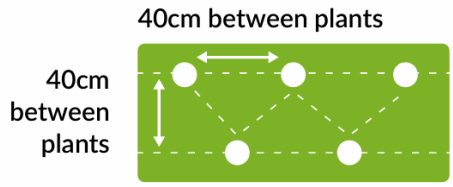
Planting Your Hedge

When planning to add a hedge into your school grounds, it's important to plan where, when and how you will plant it.
Please follow the planting advice of the following organisations:

The Woodland Trust
Hedgerows Ireland
All-Ireland Pollinator Plan

Generally, these organisations advise on the following steps:

- Use 1-2 year old hedging whips to create your hedge (these can be sourced from many local nurseries).
- Plant your hedge between November and February, when plants are dormant.
- Plant your hedge approximately 1-1.5m from any boundary.
- It is best to plant a double row hedge, with each whip planted about 30-40cm apart in a zig-zag pattern:



- Plant to the root collar, ensuring roots are not exposed and gently press well into the soil.
- Tie to a bamboo stake for stability or place a biodegradable hedge guard over for protection from grazing rabbits.

Aftercare

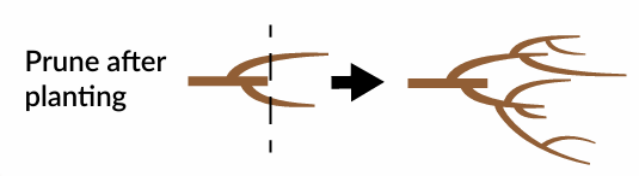
Ideally, approximately 1m around your hedge should be kept weed-free for the first 2 years of growth. This can be done by laying natural mulch around the newly-planted whips. This could be made of sheep's wool, wet newspaper, well-rotted leaf mould or bark chips. Alternatively, the area around the hedge can be trampled or hand weeded to help promote hedge growth in the first 2 years.

These actions may not be possible if your tree has been planted in lawn, or if you are short on resources to carry this out.
Don't panic! Even hedges planted in lawn can be successful – they just might take a little longer to reach maturity.

Our climate should keep your hedge nice and moist, but if we experience a particularly dry spell, new hedges need to be kept well-watered. Watering should be done in the evening when the heat of the day has passed or early in the morning.

First Spring

We recommend that you lightly prune the whips (all except holly!) in the first Spring after planting. This involves cutting the branches back to just above a bud to help them quickly bush out and thicken the hedgerow.



This first prune is not necessary but will help to thicken your hedge up faster.

Following this first prune (if carried out) leave your hedge to settle in for 2 years.

It's important to know that in the first season after planting, your new hedge will come into leaf much later than an established hedge of the same species.

Hedge Support Features

Signage and Protection

Have your class design and create some signs that identify the newly planted hedge and ask for it not to be disturbed. If the layout allows, tying some string in front of the hedge may be another way to identify and protect it from lawn mowers.

It may also be a good idea to ensure that whoever looks after your school grounds is aware of the new hedge and ensures they don't damage it with any maintenance activities.

Hedge Guards

There is no need to take action with biodegradable guards as these are designed to break apart and biodegrade naturally once the whip grows up a bit.

If you find these guards are falling off the whips and laying on the ground, feel free to collect them up and compost them separately.

If your hedge is starting to look sturdy enough (especially after 2 years) and your guards haven't fallen off themselves, make sure to remove them manually so they don't choke the tree.

Bamboo Stakes

If using bamboo stakes to hold biodegradable hedge guards in place, these can be removed once the hedge guards fall off and reused for other gardening activities.

If using stakes alone and no hedge guards, it is usually safe to remove these from about 1 year after planting your hedge.
If your trees are growing fast and the string holding the tree to the stake looks tight, make sure to remove it as soon as possible!

Around Your Hedge

We recommend that you keep the grassy margins on either side of your hedge long, only mowing them once a year in the Autumn. If you do this, you will likely see a lovely variety of flowering plants pop up. This will make a great protective area for any wildlife using your hedge and will also provide even more food and shelter for our pollinators and invertebrates.

You may also want to plant some pollinator-friendly and aesthetically-pleasing bulbs around your hedge too. We would recommend crocus, snowdrops, bluebells (make sure you plant the native ones) and daffodils.

Your Established Hedge

After about 2 years most of your hedging plants will have established and 'filled out'.

At this point, you should start a regular maintenance schedule. We recommend only cutting your hedge back on a **2-3 year rotation**.

Trimming should only take place between **November to February**. This will protect active pollinators and nesting birds who will actively use the hedge the rest of the year. It is recommended that trimming is prioritised to take place in February as this allows fruit to remain available over winter for feeding birds and mammals.

Please note that if you would like to keep some trees as features within your hedge (we would recommend this for variety in height) then don't trim back the larger species and allow them to keep growing.

To encourage inner structural integrity, once you have shaped your hedge, reach inside every 1m or so and cut a stem just above a bud.

If you notice any gaps forming in your hedge please try to fill them with similar native hedge species. A gap in a hedgerow can have a big impact on the wildlife they support.

Never use any herbicides or pesticides on or around your hedgerow!

Further Information and Links

The below websites give some more in-depth information on hedgerows:

Hedgerows Ireland
Woodland Trust
All-Ireland Pollinator Plan
The Conservation Volunteers

Suggested Native Species

Please remember to follow responsible foraging guidelines when collecting edible fruit and nuts from your hedgerow.
Woodland Trust - Foraging Guidelines

Make sure to do your research before trying any foraging or cooking using wild foods. It is important that you can confidently recognise the plant and know how to handle it safely.

Take extra care: Some berries listed below are edible when their toxic seeds are removed. Failure to remove the seeds can result in negative health consequences. Make sure you read this document thoroughly before trying any foraging and always do some extra research.

Remember, the hedgerow species listed above can be found throughout the countryside and across schools, parks and gardens.

Hawthorn

Crataegus monogyna

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- Great source of food for pollinators in Spring
- Berries can be made into jams/jellies
- Hawthorn jam is good for hearth health
- Hawthorn jam recipe

Caution:

- Raw hawthorn berries should **not** be eaten
- The seeds inside the berries are **poisonous** if consumed in high quantities
- Sharp thorns

Blackthorn

Prunus spinosa

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- Produces berries called “sloes”
- Great source of food for pollinators in Spring
- You can make a delicious sloe jam combined with apples
- Sloe jam recipe

Caution:

- The fruit-stones, leaves and flower are all **poisonous** and should **not** be eaten
- Sharp thorns which can cause red, itchy infection if scraped

Hazel

Corylus avellana

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- Nuts can be eaten raw or baked into various items
- With coppicing you can produce a higher yield of nuts
- In Spring, the long yellow catkins provide pollen for insects

Caution:

- Be aware of students with nut allergies

Holly

Ilex aquifolium

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- Provides cover, food and nesting for birds
- Flowers provide nectar and pollen for pollinators
- Dry leaves provide good cover for hibernating mammals

Caution:

- The berries are **poisonous** and should **not** be eaten
- Waxy leaves are very sharp

Bird Cherry

Prunus padus

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- The flowers provide nectar and pollen for insects
- Fruits are eaten by birds, badgers and small mammals
- Black fruits are edible, but bitter when raw - they can be turned into juices and jams

Caution:

- The fruit-stones are **poisonous** and should **not** be eaten raw

Elder

Sambucus nigra

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- Berries can be turned into jams and jellies
- Elderflowers can be infused in drinks or syrups
- Elderberry jam recipe

Caution:

- The seeds are **poisonous** and should **not** be eaten
- To separate the berries from the seeds, it is best to mash them so the seeds aren't damaged. When damaged the seeds can release their toxins

Spindle

Euonymus europaeus

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- Provides food for mice, birds and foxes
- Flowers are a source of nectar and pollen for insects
- Bright coloured fruits are very attractive

Caution:

- The orange spindle berries (within the pink casing) are **poisonous** and should **not** be eaten

Guelder Rose

Viburnum opulus

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- Berries can be turned into jams and jellies
- Displays large, white flowers in Summer and red berries in Autumn, providing food for many birds
- Guelder Rose jelly recipe

Caution:

- Raw berries should **not** be eaten

Crab Apple

Malus sylvestris

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- Crab apples can be turned into jams and jellies
- Flowers are an excellent food source for pollinators
- Apples are an important food source for birds and small mammals
- Crab apple jelly recipe

Caution:

- Crab apples are very bitter if eaten raw

Rowan

Sorbus acuparia

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- Berries are a good food source for birds and mammals

Caution:

- Raw berries are **poisonous** should **not** be eaten

Oak

Quercus petraea

Uses / Benefits:

- Native
- Acorns provide food for many birds and mammals
- Acorns can be eaten when roasted
- Uses of acorns

Caution:

- Raw acorns should **not** be eaten