

Devon hedges at home: the benefits of a garden hedge



Garden hedges can be attractive and rich in wildlife, and make effective living fences. ©John Whetman

Hedges provide an attractive and colourful living screen or barrier for the garden: they don't rot, need painting or blow over in a gale. Careful choice of species will provide excellent wildlife habitat. This section gives guidance on some of the best species to choose for different situations and others to avoid, and how to plant and manage garden hedges. Native species, the use of which is often preferable, are shown in bold type throughout.

Hedges can provide:

- A visual screen to increase privacy and seclusion
- A smoke screen for barbeques and bonfires
- Prickly thorns to enhance security
- Living rooms that make the garden more intimate and private
- Flowers for insects, fruit and nesting sites for birds, and a permeable boundary that allows movement of wildlife such as hedgehogs
- Shelter for the garden and house
- Cleaner air by removing toxic particles and gases

The best formal hedges are those using either **beech** or **hornbeam**. Both thrive in a wide variety of soils, grow quickly and make a dense, very twiggy hedge. An added advantage is they retain their coppery-brown leaves through the winter, so don't look too bare. However, apart from providing shelter and nesting sites they are of limited value to wildlife - acceptable if you just want a plain green wall that goes brown in winter.

A hedge can be quite an informal feature and using a mixture of native species results in a strong boundary that provides a range of colours, flowers and fruit over the year, keeping the householder in touch with the seasons and benefiting wildlife.

You could make your hedge productive by planting a row of apple varieties, but use the dwarfing rootstock Malling 9 and plant 80-100 cm apart. An apple hedge will need the support of 2 m stakes and wires.

Firethorn *Pyracantha* is available in varieties with red, orange or yellow berries, so lends itself to interesting colour schemes.



Firethorn Pyracantha is an excellent source of nectar, and of autumn berries and colour. ©Jon Marshall

Hedges for all situations (*native species are shown in bold*)

Type	Height	Species Choice
Miniature hedges	30 cm	Box <i>Buxus sempervirens</i> , yew <i>Taxus baccata</i>
Flowering border hedges	50-100 cm	English lavender <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> 'Hidcote', rosemary <i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i> cultivars
Formal hedges	2 m	Beech <i>Fagus sylvatica</i> , field maple <i>Acer campestre</i> , hornbeam <i>Carpinus betulus</i>
Formal hedges	3-5 m	Beech <i>Fagus sylvatica</i> , common laurel <i>Prunus laurocerasus</i> , hornbeam <i>Carpinus betulus</i> , Portugal laurel <i>Prunus lusitanica</i>
Flowering hedges	1-3 m	<i>Escallonia</i> hybrids, hawthorn <i>Crataegus monogyna</i> or <i>C. laevigata</i> , lauristinus <i>Viburnum tinus</i> , Mexican orange blossom <i>Choisya ternata</i>
Prickly flowering hedges	1-3 m	Barberry <i>Berberis</i> species and hybrids, firethorn <i>Pyracantha</i> cultivars, gorse <i>Ulex europaeus</i> , hawthorn <i>Crataegus monogyna</i>
Fruiting hedges	2-3 m	<i>Cotoneaster lacteus</i> , firethorn cultivars, hawthorn <i>Crataegus monogyna</i>
Evergreen hedges	2-3 m	<i>Cotoneaster salicifolius</i> , holly <i>Ilex aquifolium</i> , Japanese spindle <i>Euonymus japonicus</i> , silverberry or oleaster <i>Elaeagnus</i> species, wild (common) privet <i>Ligustrum vulgare</i> , yew <i>Taxus baccata</i>
Native hedge species	2-4 m	Buckthorn <i>Rhamnus cathartica</i> , dogwood <i>Cornus sanguinea</i> , field maple <i>Acer campestre</i> , guelder-rose <i>Viburnum opulus</i> , hawthorn <i>Crataegus monogyna</i> or <i>C. laevigata</i> , hazel <i>Corylus avellana</i> , holly <i>Ilex aquifolium</i> , spindle <i>Euonymus europaeus</i> , wayfaring tree <i>Viburnum lantana</i> - with some dog-rose <i>Rosa canina</i> , sweet-briar <i>Rosa rubiginosa</i> and honeysuckle <i>Lonicera periclymenum</i> .
Exposed sites	2-3 m	Daisy bush <i>Olearia x haastii</i> , <i>Escallonia</i> hybrids, New Zealand broadleaf <i>Griselinia littoralis</i> , oleaster <i>Elaeagnus x ebbingei</i>
Salt-laden winds	2-3 m	Daisy bush <i>Brachyglottis (Senecio) greyi</i> , <i>Escallonia</i> hybrids, fuschia <i>Fuchsia magellanica</i> , <i>Griselinia littoralis</i> , <i>Hebe</i> hybrids, daisy bush <i>Olearia x haastii</i>
Salt-laden winds	3-5 m	Common sea-buckthorn <i>Hippophae rhamnoides</i> tamarisk <i>Tamarix gallica</i>
Windbreaks	4-6 m	Grey alder <i>Alnus incana</i> , hybrid poplars like <i>Populus x canadensis</i> 'Gelrica'

Additional interest and wildlife benefit can be created by planting native climbers such as **honeysuckle** *Lonicera periclymenum*, **traveller's joy** (old man's beard) *Clematis vitalba* and **black bryony** *Tamus communis*, together with wild roses **dog-rose** *Rosa canina* and **sweet briar** *R. rubiginosa*. They can use the hedge shrubs as natural supports, or can be trained up a trellis work. The late season flowers and fruit of **ivy** *Hedera helix* are very valuable for wildlife and this climber can be encouraged to cover bare walls and tree trunks.

Devon hedgebanks

If you have an ancient hedgebank in your garden, or wish to create a new one, it can be a very interesting part of the design, increase the space available for planting, and help to ensure the garden has a distinctive Devon character. The bank sides can be faced with either turf or stone. They can be planted with a wide variety of native and ornamental flowers and shrubs. Banks faced with local stone in particular may be made to look very colourful, like upright rockeries. With time, mosses, lichens and ferns are likely to colonise the stones and cracks between them, complementing planted and self-seeded ornamental and culinary herbs.

Depending on whether the bank has a sunny or shady aspect, a variety of attractive native species can be encouraged. Spring flowers such as **primrose** *Primula vulgaris*, **dog violet** *Viola canina*, **wood anemone** *Anemone nemorosa* and **bluebell** *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* flower before any non-evergreen shrubs come into leaf so will tolerate summer shade. Ferns like the evergreen **hart's-tongue** *Asplenium scolopendrium*, and the deciduous **male-fern** *Dryopteris filix-mas* and **lady-fern** *Athyrium filix-femina* will flourish on the shady side.

The sunny side offers more scope. All the spring flowers can be included together with summer-flowering species which will tolerate dry conditions - the bank may well dry out in the summer. Native species likely to survive



Hedges make effective screens and improve air quality. This lilac and snowberry hedge has been expertly steeped (laid). ©George Pidgeon

include **common toadflax** *Linaria vulgaris*, **speedwells** *Veronica* species, **betony** *Stachys officinalis*, **common knapweed** *Centaurea nigra*, **field scabious** *Knautia arvensis* and the delicate **sheep's-bit** *Jasione montana*. Also consider the autumn flowering *Cyclamen hederifolium*. Climbers may also be useful, as described above.

There are more details of the native plants typically found growing on the banks of Devon hedges in section 6, *Devon hedges and wildlife 2: flowers, field margins and ditches*, and management guidance is provided in section 9, *Devon hedge management 1: maintaining and repairing turf and stone facing*.



Stone faced banks, typical of many Devon hedges, can make very attractive garden features. ©Robert Wolton

Plants to avoid

Take care not to plant **yew** where livestock can eat it: its seed and leaves are poisonous. Also remember that the berries and other parts of many plants, for example **wild (common) privet**, cherry laurel and **black bryony**, are toxic to humans, pets or livestock.

Beware of the box-leaved honeysuckle *Lonicera nitida*. It makes a neat evergreen hedge when young but is difficult to keep in shape when older and needs trimming very frequently. It's not of much benefit to wildlife.

Beware also of the Leyland cypress *Cupressus × leylandii*, the black sheep of hedging! It's a hybrid between the Monterey cypress *Cupressus macrocarpa* from California and the Nootka cypress *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* from Vancouver, Canada. It's over vigorous, over planted and over here! It does make a thick green hedge very rapidly, but needs rigorous control or it gets out of hand and can offend the neighbours. It can make a 50 m forest tree! See the section on the *Law and other protection* (page 90) for information on the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 which refers to *leylandii*.

Where possible, try and use locally occurring native trees and shrubs since these are likely to support more wildlife than ones from abroad or cultivars, and there's no risk of invasive harmful plants spreading into the wild. When choosing native species, make sure that the plants are grown from native British seed - the supplier will be able to confirm this.

Planting

Hedges of **beech**, **hornbeam**, **field maple** and other native trees are best obtained as two year old plants which have been transplanted once and are supplied with bare roots. Species like **holly** and other shrubs will be available in pots. The best time of year to plant is in the late autumn or early spring, during the dormant period. Shrubs grown in pots will need careful aftercare to prevent them drying out. For further information on planting hedges, please see section 8, *Devon hedge creation: new turf faced banks and planting*.



Hedges, like these copper beech ones, can be used to create intimate spaces and unexpected views.

©Jon Marshall



Traditional Devon hedge retained in RHS Garden Rosemoor. ©Tom Hynes



Beech makes a dense hedge that retains some leaves during the winter and provides good cover for wildlife. ©John Whetman

Maintaining hedges

Management will depend on the type of hedge. Simple **beech** or **hornbeam** hedges can be trimmed once or twice a year, preferably in the early autumn before the new growth becomes hard and woody - the trimmings will then compost quickly. Flowering hedges not grown for fruit should be pruned soon after flowering is completed, to encourage new growth for next year's flowers. Fruiting hedges should be left until all the fruit has been eaten, and trimmed in the late winter, but try to leave some old growth each year as the flowers and fruits are borne on the previous year's growth.

At Royal Horticultural Society Rosemoor much of the formal garden has been developed on two fields separated by a traditional Devon hedge, consisting largely of **blackthorn**, **hawthorn**, **oak** and **ash**. This hedge has been kept within the garden design and has been managed to benefit wildlife and to look good within the formal garden setting. The hedge has been steeped (laid) and some additional species (**holly**, **spindle** and **field maple**) have been planted to attract wildlife.

Bear in mind that you must not disturb birds nesting in your hedges. The critical period is from March to the end of July but, as several garden birds can still have nests in August, please avoid trimming garden hedges between March and August inclusive.

Further information

1. Sarah Carter. 2008. *Cornish Hedges in Gardens*. The Cornish Hedges Library. www.cornishhedges.co.uk
2. Please see Devon Hedge Group web pages for a list of local suppliers of hedge shrubs and trees. www.devon.gov.uk/hedges