
Guidelines for regenerating derelict hedgerows

Hedges have been traditionally managed by laying every 10-20 years to stockproof and regenerate them. If hedges are not managed then free growth of the hedge will eventually result in mature trees. Continual annual trimming over a long period of time can lead to deterioration, through gaps, hollow bottoms and die back. In both cases a means of management must be considered if the hedge is to survive in the long term.

This information aims to provide general guidance on the standard of work required for projects grant aided by the Peak District National Park Authority.

Laying

This is a traditional method of long-term management of hedges. It produces good stockproof barriers and rejuvenates the plants contained in the hedge.

(i) Timing and weather conditions

Hedge laying is generally done between November and March. In upland areas, laying is often done after mid-February to avoid the risk of hard frosts.

As a general guide, the leaves should have started to 'turn' before work begins and it is best to stop when the buds start to burst in the Spring.

Avoid laying a hedge during or soon before a hard frost as stems become brittle and frost can damage plants with fresh cuts. Older stems are most susceptible to frost.

(ii) Preliminary management

'Siding-up' may be necessary before laying. This involves side trimming of the hedge for 2-3 years before laying to produce strong leading shoots and an overall hedge height of 2-3m.

All old fencing material, dead wood, Bramble, Rose and Elder present in the hedge should be removed before laying.

(iii) Method of laying

Before laying the hedge, all old fencing material should be removed from the hedge together with Bramble, Rose and Elder. As Elder is such a vigorous plant it is advisable to cut out the Elder and treat the cut stumps with an appropriate chemical (following manufacturer's recommendations).

Each pleacher (the living stem) should be cut 2.5-10cm above ground level. The actual height of cut will vary depending on the thickness of the stem. Optimal stem diameter for laying is 5-10cm. Thicker stems can be laid but are more difficult and may break off during the laying process.

The 'hinge' should be left as thick as practical so nutrients can reach the pleacher whilst allowing it to be laid over without back splitting.

The style of laying should reflect local custom and the Midland method (where the pleachers are laid at 25° - 45°) is generally acceptable.

As a general rule, pleachers should be laid up the slope on inclines. Under most circumstances pleachers should be laid in one direction only but laying both ways is acceptable where there are gaps. Small gaps, less than 1m, can be filled with trimmings as dead wood provides a valuable wildlife habitat.

The laid pleachers should be interwoven through stakes placed at approximately 1m intervals. Stakes should generally be 4-5cm in diameter.

Avoid laying large continuous lengths of hedgerow in one year as this will result in a dramatic loss of mature hedgerow habitat. It is far preferable to lay shorter sections of hedgerow around the farm in any one year.

Where hedgerow trees are sparse occasional stems (every 25-50 metres) can be allowed to grow on to establish as standard trees, particularly at junctions with other hedgerows. However, where breeding waders, particularly lapwings, are present on adjacent land, establishing further hedgerow trees may not be appropriate. Conservation Service staff can offer further advice.

iv) After laying

Any gaps left after laying should be planted up with young plants (see 'Guidelines for hedge planting').

Protective fencing will be required to protect the new growth from livestock. There should be a minimum of 1m left on either side of the laying and planting (see 'Guidelines for stock proof fencing').

After laying, the hedge should be left for at least 2 years, and then trimmed. It may be maintained by regular trimming every 2 years or so. When the hedge becomes gappy at the base it should be sided-up for 2-3 years to allow the strong leading shoots to grow on, and the laying process followed again. Hedge laying rotations can vary between 10-30 years.

Coppicing

Coppicing rejuvenates mature plants. This method is best used where the hedge is too large or too low to lay or if there is a lot of deadwood in the stems of the hedge.

(i) Timing and weather conditions

Coppicing should be carried out in the winter months during spells of mild weather.

(ii) Method

All stems should be trimmed by a clean-angled cut to a desired height around 7.5cm from ground level and angled to shed water.

If the hedge plants are of a large size then they should be felled and the stumps trimmed afterwards.

Retain hedgerow trees or mature shrubs every 25-50 metres.

Avoid coppicing large continuous lengths of hedgerow in one year as this will result in a dramatic loss of habitat. It is far preferable to coppice shorter sections of hedgerow around the farm in any one year.

(iii) After coppicing

Any gaps left after coppicing should be planted up with young plants (see 'Guidelines for hedge planting'). Where hedgerow trees are sparse individual whips can be marked and allowed to grow on to establish as standard trees.

Protective fencing will be required to protect the new growth from livestock. There should be a minimum of 1m left on either side between coppicing and planting (see 'Guidelines for stock proof fencing').

Allow regrowth for 7-10 years before laying the young stems.

Hedgerow management

(i) Gapping up

As a general rule it is not necessary to plant up gaps of 1m or less as regrowth should be sufficient to fill the gap. For larger gaps, laying across the gap will not ensure that it will close permanently so planting is necessary. Rabbit netting or quills may be required to protect the planting.

Layering (when a laid pleacher is dug into the ground) is acceptable as a means of establishing new root stock in a gap.

Establishment of new plants in an old hedge is often difficult as the site is usually dry and leached of nutrients. It is essential to 'improve' the soil in such circumstances by digging in well-rotted farmyard manure.

Reference should be made to the 'Guidelines for hedge planting'.

(ii) Cutting

Cutting should be carried out between the end of December and the beginning of March to avoid the breeding season of birds, and to retain winter cover and food for birds. Hedges should not be trimmed when there is a hard frost or during the spring flush.

Two growing seasons should be allowed between trimming as fewer birds and small mammals are observed in intensively managed hedges. Frequent trimming can be damaging to the hedge in the long term. Establishing a 2-3 year trimming rotation will develop a varied hedge pattern around the farm and additional opportunities and habitat for wildlife.

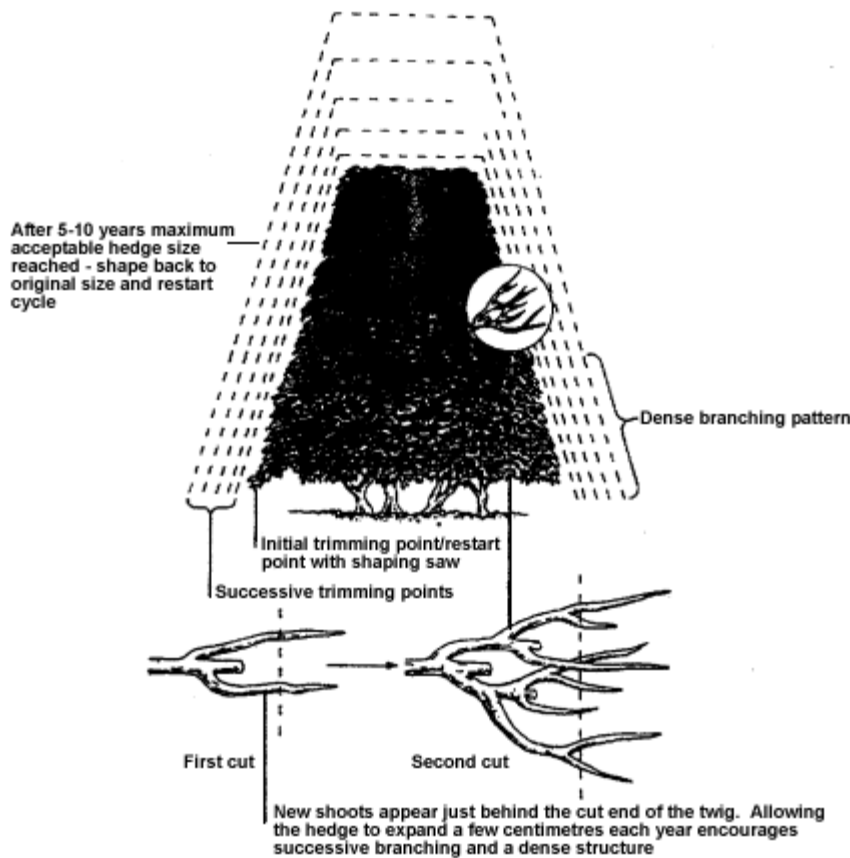
(iii) Shape

A topped 'A' shaped hedge has advantages for wildlife, for the growth of the hedge and is the most effective wind-break allowing wind to pass over it with less turbulence. An 'A' shape reduces self-shading and promotes thick growth at the hedge base which is important for food and shelter for wildlife.

Tall, thick hedges with woody outgrowths are of the greatest value for breeding birds. A rectangular shape normally means that one side of the hedge is severely shaded, which will inhibit growth.

Whilst the shape of the desired hedge can be significant it may be less important than is often claimed. Often more significant for wildlife is that the base of the hedge is buffered from any cultivation or inputs by a grass strip.

Hedgerow



(iv) Size

The number of nesting or feeding bird species is strongly linked to hedgerow size. Approximately double the number of bird species occur in taller hedges (i.e. over 1.4m) compared with shorter hedges. This is because they provide shelter from predators, good nesting sites and more food.

Other important factors include the number of shrub species in the hedge and the proximity of other features such as ponds and woodlands.

(v) Tools

The type of hedgecutter used influences the growth of the hedge. Tractor mounted circular saw blades may be used on heavy growth and to reshape overgrown hedges.

Flail hedge trimmers are the most common tools but used on heavy growth they can cause unsightly cuts, splintering the plants and causing fungal infection and die-back. Flail cutters should not be used on woody stems of over 3 years growth.

Flail cutting is not appropriate when there are known historic features, such as guide stoops or crosses, within, or close to, the hedge.

This guidance is given for general advice only and may not be appropriate to all situations. For more details and site specific advice please contact the Conservation Service on 01629 816270 or email farming@peakdistrict.gov.uk.