

“Managing Your Hedgerows”

Hedgerows are important as wildlife habitats and as features in the landscape of County Kilkenny. They are increasingly under threat from neglect, poor management and removal. From 1st September until the end of February is the appropriate time for carrying out management of the hedgerows on your farm or property. Below are useful hints on the best methods of managing your hedgerows.

The Value of Hedgerows

Hedges are important heritage features. They are a very important habitat for many plants and animals. They are particularly important habitats for birds – two thirds of Ireland’s bird species nest in hedgerows. Birds also feed off insects and the fruits and seeds in the hedge, and they use hedges as sheltered traveling routes.

Hedgerow Management – Do’s and Don’ts

1. From 1st September until the end of February is the appropriate time for carrying out any management of hedgerows. In fact, it is prohibited under the Wildlife (Amendment) Act, 2000 to cut, remove or burn any vegetation in a hedge or ditch during the period 1st March to 31st August.
2. As a starting point, check the hedges on your land to assess their general condition. Identify desirable species; the most valuable for wildlife include native species such as oak, birch, mountain ash, whitethorn, alder, willow, ash, holly, crab, and Scots pine.
3. Hedges should be cut to an A-shaped profile, with a bushy top for maximum protection from wind. This will encourage the development of a dense hedge. Square cut hedges will put out a twiggy, lateral growth, encroaching on roads and paths.
4. An established hedge will need cutting every two to three years. There is considerable wildlife benefit if maintenance is done in rotation around the farm to ensure that there is growth at all stages. If possible, one side of the hedge should be trimmed at a time.
5. Where mechanical cutting is required, identify tree saplings to be retained. The vegetation around the saplings should be cleared manually and be clearly marked to alert the machine operator.
6. The preferable method of hedge maintenance is by hand tools. Where this is not practical, particular care should be given to the correct use of machinery. Remember the importance of sharp tools and regular maintenance of equipment.
7. Finger bar cutters with a pair of reciprocating blades are very suitable for trimming young growth.
8. A flail cutter should only be used on soft growth (2-3 years old) of thorny species, and never on heavy woody growth: the resulting ragged ends are

unsightly and invite disease. Smooth wood species such as willow, hazel and cherry are not well suited to flail cutting.

9. A circular saw should only be considered for coppicing and must not be used for general hedgerow maintenance.
10. Fencing wire should not be attached to hedgerow trees and shrubs.
11. Overgrown or neglected hedges with sufficient vigour may be restored by coppicing – selective cutting at ground level to promote bushy regrowth.
12. Hedge-laying involves the part cutting through of selected stems, bending them over at an angle of 70-80 degrees, and securing the stems. This can be part of the long-term maintenance cycle of a hedgerow and is recommended as a method of hedge-rejuvenation and stockproofing.
13. Gaps in hedgerows that cannot be closed by laying should be planted with hawthorn quicks, blackthorn or other suitable native species at not more than 30cm (1ft) spacing in prepared ground. The young plants should be cut back to half their height after planting to promote growth.
14. Do not apply herbicides, pesticides or fertilisers within 1.5m of a hedgerow, as this leads to nutrient enrichment that can adversely affect biodiversity.
15. Where practicable, hedge trimmings should be piled in a non-intrusive manner to provide habitat. If hedge trimmings are to be removed, this must be done immediately after cutting.

For further information on hedgerows contact your Dearbhala Ledwidge, Heritage Officer, Kilkenny County Council or the local Wildlife Ranger, Parks and Wildlife Service (Tel: 065-7760071). Also, a very useful set of information leaflets on hedgerows and hedgerow management are available from your local Teagasc office. These are also available on the Teagasc website www.teagasc.ie/publications.

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