



# Conserving Hedgerows

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta  
The Heritage Council



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**A hedge usually consists of a row of shrubs or trees planted along the line of a man-made earth or stone bank. A ditch from which the bank material was excavated runs parallel to the hedge. Hedges are used to mark boundaries and to contain stock; they provide shelter from wind and facilitate drainage, and need continuous management in order to remain effective.**

## The Value Of Hedgerows

Hedges are important heritage features. Varying greatly in form and species, they help to form the local and regional character of the landscape. Hedges on deep, fertile and well-drained soils are usually dominated by hawthorn and may have trees of ash, elm, sycamore or beech. Shallow or acid soils will give rise to gorse, while hedges on poorly drained land are likely to be dominated by willow. Ancient hedges are survivors of the woods that covered the country before it became agricultural land, and have a particular conservation value as they often contain a richer variety of plant life than more recent hedges. Much of Ireland's hedgerow landscape, as we know it today, was established between 1750 and 1850 as landlords enclosed former commonage to form fields. Field boundaries are standing records of the area's history of land ownership and display evidence of local geology, local craftsmanship, and local farming practice. They show the work of many people; those that established and maintained them, and those that built the cut stone piers or forged the wrought iron gates.

Hedgerows provide food and shelter for insects, birds and other animals, forming corridors that permit wildlife to move between habitats. As many birds and small mammals never venture more than a few metres from cover, populations would become isolated and vulnerable without hedges. Nearly two thirds of Ireland's bird species nest in hedges. In general, wide and high hedges with a broad diversity of plant species are the most beneficial to wildlife.

Hedges are durable. A properly maintained hedge will last for centuries, and is ultimately more cost effective than any alternative boundary. Hedges provide shelter from wind for stock, crops and road users. They alleviate the blinding effects of low sun, filter dust and fumes, and absorb road noise. Hedges provide springy, relatively safe crash barriers beside roads and are more interesting visually for visitors and local travellers than wood or cement boundaries; they are also more distinctively local in character and can be used to shield unsightly fences. Mature flowering hedgerows, predominantly of hawthorn, provide a strong visual impact on the countryside in early summer.





# Threats To Hedgerows

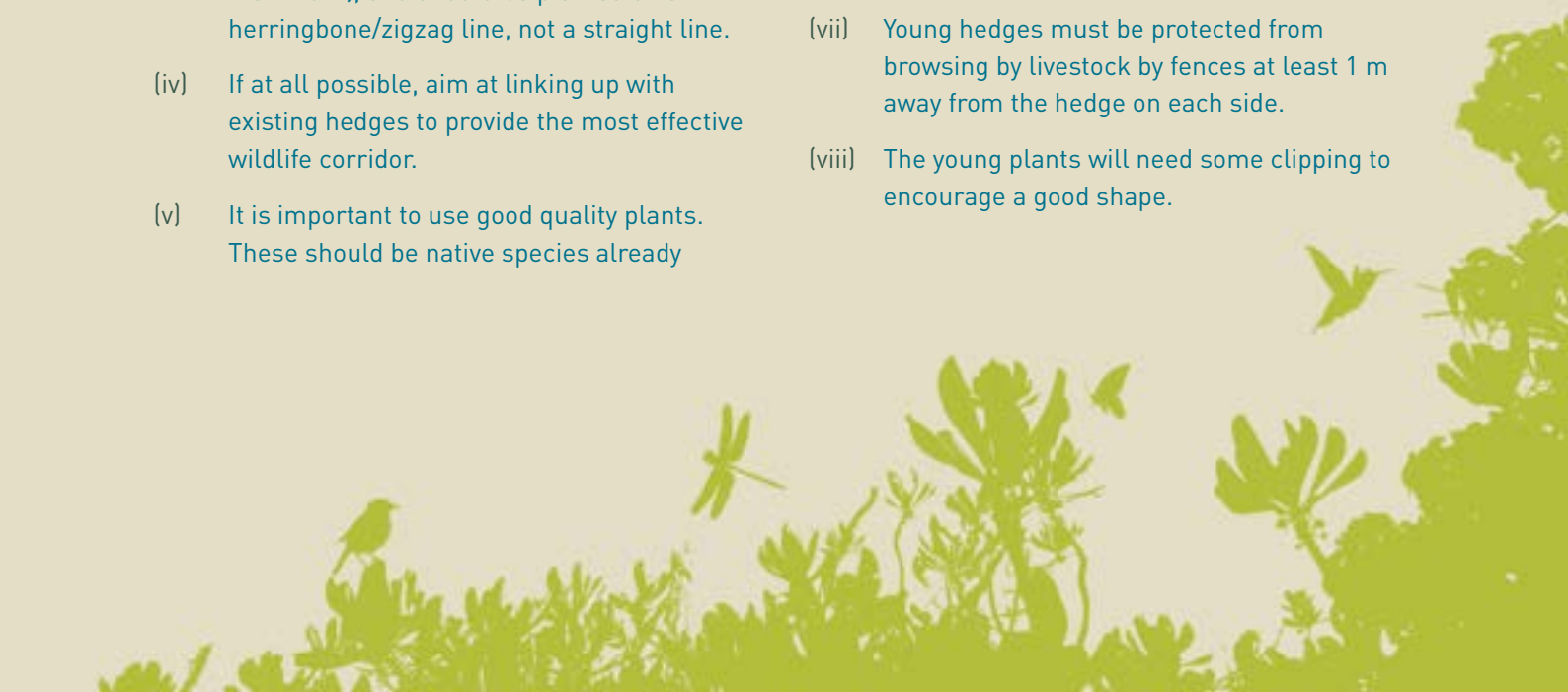
- (i) Hedges need regular maintenance in order to provide effective boundary and shelter. Neglected hedges grow tall and gappy, so that they cease to function as effective barriers. A gappy hedge is bad both for wildlife and for farming.
- (ii) Neglected hedges may become overgrown with bramble and elder so that they encroach on fields or roadways and become inaccessible for maintenance.
- (iii) Inappropriate management can damage hedges. This includes frequent (annual) cutting, and cutting during the bird nesting period.
- (iv) Building developments in which all hedgerows are removed are a major threat to the hedgerow network.
- (v) Road-widening programmes may threaten hedges. Although the removal of hedges may be necessary for public safety, in many cases it is possible to preserve the original boundary by moving it back from the road to a safer position.
- (vi) Disturbances of roadsides to lay and maintain services such as telecommunications, sewage and water can cause disruption to hedgerow root systems, or hedges may be completely removed. This can be avoided with proper planning.
- (vii) Poor roadside drainage can threaten hedges by rotting their root systems. It can also endanger road users. It is important to maintain drains, particularly to prevent blockage with plastic.
- (viii) Hedges may be removed because there is a wish to open up views from roads in scenic areas. This is usually unnecessary if proper hedge maintenance is practiced.
- (ix) Field enlargement is a threat to hedges. Farmers need to remove hedges in some cases, but should be encouraged to retain and maintain hedges, particularly along roadsides, as vital links in wildlife corridors.





## Planting

- (i) When planting new hedges, drainage must be considered at the outset. A bank and ditch may be desirable.
- (ii) It is important to leave sufficient width for the established hedge (2 m).
- (iii) Young plants should be closely spaced (50 cm maximum), and should be planted on a herringbone/zigzag line, not a straight line.
- (iv) If at all possible, aim at linking up with existing hedges to provide the most effective wildlife corridor.
- (v) It is important to use good quality plants. These should be native species already represented in hedgerows in the area. Crann can advise on growing plants from locally sourced seeds or cuttings (see contacts below). Once your hedge is established, other native species will colonise it.
- (vi) New growth must be protected from weed competition until it is established.
- (vii) Young hedges must be protected from browsing by livestock by fences at least 1 m away from the hedge on each side.
- (viii) The young plants will need some clipping to encourage a good shape.





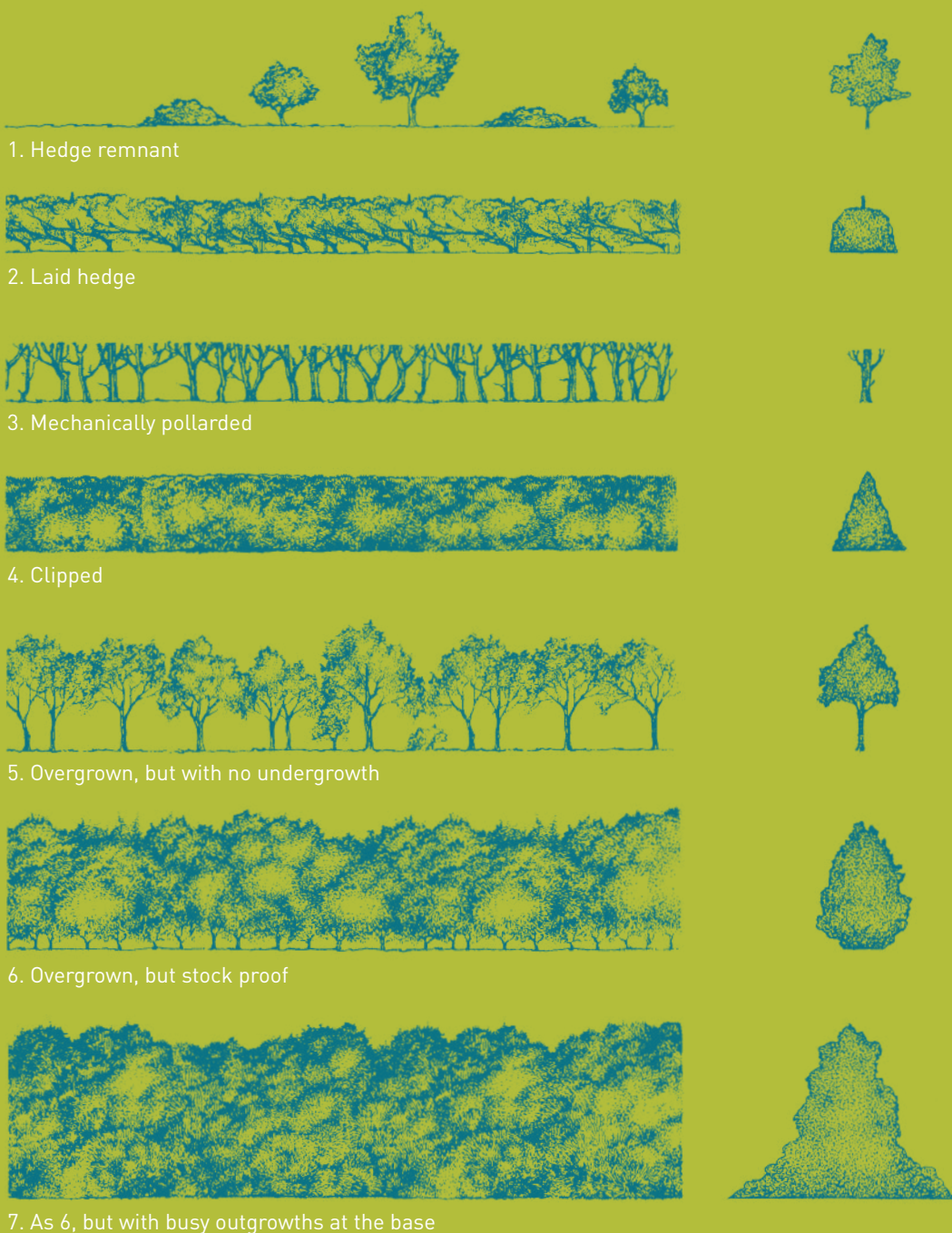
# Maintenance

Hedgerows must be managed to encourage their long-term conservation and development. Proper maintenance encourages flowering, fruiting, vigour, and wildlife potential. The age, condition, composition, and function of the hedgerow will dictate what maintenance is required. Mature hedgerows in good condition should be allowed to grow naturally, with maintenance confined to essential practices such as stockproofing, inplanting, and the control of invasive species. Weak hedgerows, which have lost their vigour, will require more intervention such as laying or coppicing. A hedgerow should have a dense base, form an unbroken barrier, and be at least 1.5 m high. 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.



- (i) Landowners should check every hedge to assess its general condition. Identify desirable species; the most valuable for wildlife include oak, birch, mountain ash, hawthorn, alder, willow, ash, holly, crab, and Scots pine. Where mechanical cutting is required, those saplings identified for retention should have the vegetation around them cleared manually and be clearly marked to alert the machine operator.
- (ii) Hedges should be cut while they are dormant, from the beginning of September to the end of February (Section 46 Wildlife Act 2000).
- (iii) 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 so that summer cutting is requested for reasons of safety and convenience.
- (iv) Overgrown or neglected hedges with sufficient vigour may be restored by coppicing – selective cutting at ground level to promote bushy regrowth.
- (v) 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.
- (vi) 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 30 cm (1ft) spacing in prepared ground. The young plants should be cut back to half their height after planting to promote growth.
- (vii) Do not apply herbicides, pesticides or fertilisers within 1.5m of a hedgerow, as this leads to nutrient enrichment that can adversely affect biodiversity.
- (viii) 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.

- (ix) The crushing of hedgerows by heavy machinery must not be permitted.
- (x) Finger bar cutters with a pair of reciprocating blades are very suitable for trimming young growth.
- (xi) A flail cutter should only be used on soft growth 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.
- (xii) A circular saw should only be considered for coppicing and must not be used for general hedgerow maintenance.
- (xiii) Fencing wire must not be attached to hedgerow trees and shrubs.
- (xiv) Where practicable, hedge trimmings should be piled in a non-intrusive manner to provide habitat. If hedge trimmings are to be removed or burned, this must be done immediately after cutting.





# The Role Of Local Authorities

In the formulation of development plans local authorities are committed to designating landscapes and their associated characteristics, under the Planning & Development Act, 2000. Through the planning process local authorities can also ensure that hedgerows are given due regard with respect to hedgerow conservation.

In recent years many local authorities have been creatively managing roadside verges to ensure a diversity of plants can survive. This ideal can be broadened to include hedgerows abutting roads. Each local authority has a responsibility to road users and their safety on public roads and while some maintenance is required to hedgerows at some locations, every effort must be made to ensure that best practice is exercised in this regard.

For more information contact:

**Heritage Council**, Áras na hOidhreachta, Church Lane, Kilkenny.

Tel: (056) 777 0777, E-mail [mail@heritagecouncil.ie](mailto:mail@heritagecouncil.ie),

for contact details of your Local Authority Heritage Officer see Website: [www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie)

**Crann**, PO Box 860, Celbridge, Co Kildare.

Tel: (01) 627 5075, E-mail: [info@crann.ie](mailto:info@crann.ie), Website: [www.crann.ie](http://www.crann.ie)

**Teagasc**, Oak Park, Carlow.

Tel: (059) 917 0200, E-mail: [Catherine.Keena@teagasc.ie](mailto:Catherine.Keena@teagasc.ie), Website: [www.teagasc.ie](http://www.teagasc.ie)

**Birdwatch Ireland**, Unit 20, Block D, Bullford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Greystones, Co. Wicklow.

Tel: (01) 281 9878, E-mail: [info@birdwatchireland.ie](mailto:info@birdwatchireland.ie), Website: [www.birdwatchireland.ie](http://www.birdwatchireland.ie)

**Irish Wildlife Trust**, Sigmund Business Centre, 93A Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate, Glasnevin, Dublin 11.

Tel: (01) 860 2839 E-mail: [enquiries@iwt.ie](mailto:enquiries@iwt.ie), Website: [www.iwt.ie](http://www.iwt.ie)

**Hedge Laying Association of Ireland**, c/o M. McDowell, 70 Bushes Lane, Rathgar, Dublin 6.

Tel: 086 3028790, E-mail: [h lai@eircom.net](mailto:h lai@eircom.net), Website: [www.hedgelaying.ie](http://www.hedgelaying.ie)

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