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Front cover image: Species-rich hedge.  
Rob Wolton/Natural England.

## Hedge cutting: answers to 18 common questions



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## Hedge cutting: answers to 18 common questions

Prepared on behalf of the Steering Group for the UK Biodiversity Action Plan for Hedgerows

This document will help farmers and other land managers make decisions about how often to cut hedges. It will also help improve the wider rural community's understanding of hedge management. In particular, this document focuses on the practicalities and environmental benefits of hedge cutting every two or three years, rather than every year.

### **Q 1. Changes in farm management mean that hedges are being cut less often now. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?**

There are two excellent reasons for not cutting every year.

The first is that most tree and shrub flowers are produced on year-old twigs. Annual cutting removes these twigs, so there are no flowers, no berries and no nuts. This has a big impact on a wide range of wildlife, from insects such as butterflies and moths, through birds such as thrushes

Hedge cut one side only.  
Rob Wolton/Natural England



(especially redwings and fieldfares), to mammals such as dormice. Only climbing plants such as brambles and roses produce good fruit crops in hedgerows that are cut every year.

The second reason is that the bigger a hedge, the more wildlife it supports. It is estimated that every year a hedgerow is left uncut it will gain two species of breeding bird; whilst some insects, such as the brown hairstreak butterfly, only lay their eggs on new growth. If this new growth is cut off each autumn or winter the eggs will die; one reason why the brown hairstreak is now so rare.

But there are exceptions. Partridges, yellowhammers and whitethroats prefer to nest in short hedges, and birds such as lapwing and skylark prefer open landscapes. Hedges should be kept low in areas that are home to important populations of these declining birds.

Brown hairstreak butterfly. Rob Wolton/Natural England





Sloe berries. David Townshend/Natural England

**Q 2. It's traditional to cut hedges every year. Why change?**

Hedges have served different purposes down the ages, such as marking boundaries, keeping stock in or out of fields, and as sources of firewood. Nowadays, they are increasingly valued as wildlife habitats and landscape features, and this means their management is changing.

When the mechanical hedge-cutting flail was introduced in the mid-20th century, the priority was to maximise food production and to maintain stock-proof barriers. The environment was not a major consideration. Under those circumstances, annual cutting was correct.

Before mechanisation became widespread, hedge cutting had been

very labour intensive, meaning that few hedgerows were trimmed every year. Now, with the environment being high on the public agenda and wire fences making many hedges obsolete as stock-proof barriers, less frequent cutting is once again appropriate for most hedges.

**Q 3. Why do hedges have to be cut at all?**

Hedges are cut to prevent them growing out into fields and reducing the land available for cropping and grazing. They are also cut to keep them thick and bushy – this is particularly important in livestock areas where hedgerows still act as living fences. This thick, bushy growth is also favoured by many birds and other wildlife such as dormice. Regular cutting also prevents the shading and loss of low-growing plants such as violets and primroses.

**Q 4. Will cutting my hedgerow once every two or three years increase costs or save me money? Can I get any financial help?**

Research has shown that cutting hedges on a two- or three-year cycle usually saves on labour and machinery costs. Where hedges contain mainly slow-growing species such as hawthorn, savings may be as high as 60 per cent. Even where fast-growing species such as ash and willow predominate, savings are still likely.

Allowing hedges to grow up and out means it's likely there will be some decrease in crop production due to land-take or to shading. This may offset the savings made from reduced cutting, particularly on arable land. If crop losses are a serious concern, consider creating uncropped field margins, or reducing the cutting of hedges only on the north sides of fields.

Financial support for both hedge and field margin management is available in England through Entry Level Stewardship or Organic Entry Level Stewardship.

**Q 5. Will cutting my hedgerow only once every two or three years damage it?**

The longer a hedge is left before it's cut, the thicker the branches will be and, if a flail mower is used, the

more ragged their cut ends. But most hedgerow plants are able to cope with this damage remarkably well; few die or become diseased.

Raising the cutting height a little each time will reduce damage to branches, as will using a shaping saw or sharp flail operating at the recommended speed. (A shaping saw is a tractor-mounted cutting head consisting of a row of circular saws that can cut cleanly through thick woody material).

Hedge laying in October. Rob Wolton/Natural England





Hedge cutting with flail, close view. Rob Wolton/Natural England

**Q 6. Will cutting less often mean that I have to lay or coppice my hedgerows sooner?**

It isn't possible to keep any hedgerow looking exactly the same year after year. With time, its structure and condition will inevitably change because it contains trees and shrubs whose growth forms change as they mature. Sooner or later all hedgerows will have to be laid or coppiced, unless they are being allowed to turn into lines of trees. Cutting will only delay this process. During the first two or three years after a new hedgerow has been planted, laid or coppiced, it may be a good idea to cut every year to ensure the development of bushy growth low down in the hedge. Otherwise, there's no reason why cutting every two or

three years should shorten the time before laying or coppicing is needed. In fact, the evidence suggests the opposite – for hawthorn hedges, cutting every few years rather than every year leads to denser hedgerows.

**Q 7. How can I respond to complaints that hedges with three years' growth look untidy, and that cutting them leaves an unsightly mess?**

It may be helpful to explain that modern farming is not just about food production, but also about producing environmental benefits, such as creating wildlife habitats and attractive landscapes. Let your questioner know that you are following government advice to manage your hedges in this way.

Shaping saw up-close. Rob Wolton/Natural England



If you can, give evidence of how local wildlife has responded – such as pointing out a greater variety and/or abundance of birdlife. This may help to convince people that you are doing the right thing.

**Q 8. Isn't flailing a mature hedge bad for it because there are so many bashed and broken stems?**

On balance it is better for wildlife, and better for the hedge itself, to cut once every few years rather than every year. The cut ends may look unpleasant for a while but this is more than outweighed by the benefits to wildlife.

**Q 9. Will cutting three-year-old growth damage my flail?**

Providing your cutting head and flails are well maintained, and you are using the right rotor and forward

speeds, there should be no problem. But you are likely to need to take more time over the hedge, with more passes and a slower forward speed.

Standard flails are designed to cut growth up to 38 mm thick, so cutting most three-year-old growth is unlikely to be a problem, even with prolonged use. Even in fertile areas, three-year-old hawthorn, hazel and oak shoots and branches are only between 15 and 20 mm thick.

The shoots of fast-growing species such as willow and ash may be 40 mm or more thick after three years, in which case heavier duty flails and more powerful cutting heads will be required. Flails are available on the market that will cut hedge growth up to 100 mm thick. Alternatively, use a shaping saw (see Q 5).

Hedge cut after five years' growth. Rob Wolton/Natural England



Redwing in hawthorn hedge. Chris Gomersall/RSPBImages.com

**Q 10. Will there be a lot of tidying up to do after cutting a hedge with two or three years' growth?**

If a flail mower is used, and care is taken, experience shows that there is usually little tidying up that needs to be done. The flails will break the shoots and branches up into small bits, many of which will fall to the base of the hedge and decay there. If the shoots are long, it may be necessary to cut them in two passes rather than one, but normally it will be better just to go forward more slowly.

**Q 11. Will there be a lot of thorns on the ground if a hedge with several years' growth is cut back? Could these cause punctures or lameness?**

Even annual cutting can result in thorns in fields, or on tracks and roads, but this problem will be greater with older growth. The tyres of motor vehicles are rarely punctured, but there is a real risk to bicycles. Blackthorn in particular can cause lameness in livestock, so it is advisable to keep stock and bicycles away from hedges that have been recently cut. Thorns break down in

wet weather fairly quickly, and along roads and tracks motor vehicles soon crush them, so the risk is usually acceptable after a few weeks.

**Q 12. What time of year should I cut? What's the law, and how can I avoid harming nesting birds?**

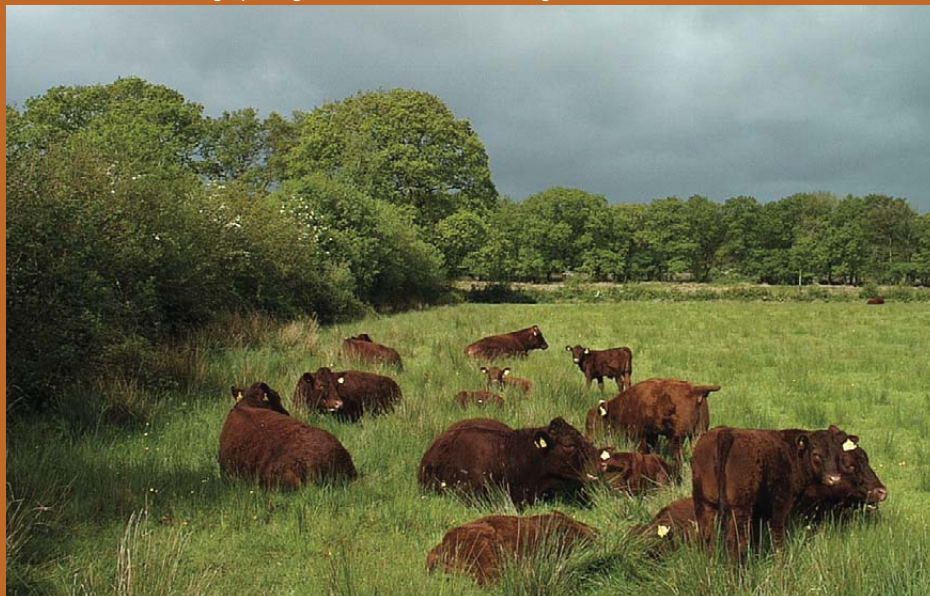
As a general rule, try and cut most of your hedgerows in January or February. If ground conditions and cropping patterns make this difficult, then cut as late as possible in the autumn. Cutting in winter means that wildlife will have the time to take advantage of the nuts and berries produced by hedge plants in the autumn. The bird breeding season, 1 March to 31 July, should always be avoided: nearly every hedgerow in the country will have birds breeding in it

during this time. Some birds continue breeding into August. All wild birds, their young, their eggs and active nests are protected under law. It is an offence to damage a nest intentionally while it is in use or being built – hedge cutting is highly likely to damage nests or cause them to be deserted.

For many moths and some butterflies, cutting in August or September is better than cutting later – probably because winter cutting removes eggs laid on new growth in the autumn.

So, if you have to cut most of your hedges in one particular year (not itself recommended), cut a few in August or September, leaving the majority until as late as possible.

Devon cattle sheltering by hedge. Rob Wolton/Natural England



Whenever there is a significant risk to the health and safety of people, hedgerows should be cut as necessary to reduce that risk. See Q 18.

If you are a Single Payment Scheme claimant in England, it is a condition that you should not cut between 1 March and 31 July, with certain exceptions.

**Q 13. Why do farmers sometimes cut their hedges in the late summer or autumn and not wait until the winter, after the birds have eaten all the berries?**

There are various reasons why farmers cut their hedges before the late winter. Sometimes it's because the land gets too soft for tractors in the winter, and their use would create ruts or compact the soil. In arable areas, it's often because tractors would damage winter-sown cereals or other crops – a working width of some 5 m is required for hedge cutting around these fields.

For some farmers, it's because they or their contractors have the time in hand in the autumn, between the busy peaks of bringing in the harvest and winter sowing, or looking after housed cattle. For others, cutting the hedges after the harvest is simply a matter of tradition, part of the seasonal cycle that characterises the farmer's way of life.

**Q 14. What should I do if I see a hedge being cut in the bird nesting season?**

There may be a valid reason why the hedge is being cut, for example to maintain road safety. If not, the chances are that the persons responsible are not aware of the risk to wildlife, or of the concern they are causing to others. With this in mind, the best approach is nearly always to talk to them, explain why you are concerned, and to listen to their reasons. Then, if appropriate, you can explain the law as you understand it and present any relevant facts you may have (like the

Young hedgerow beech tree. Rob Wolton/Natural England



presence of active bird nests). This way of doing things is likely to result in a better outcome for you, for the land manager, and for wildlife. It's almost always better to do this rather than immediately contact the police.

**Q 15. Should I cut all my hedges in one year, or cut on a rotational basis, trimming only a proportion each year?**

Try not to cut all your hedges in any one year. This will ensure that there is always suitable habitat on your farm for wildlife that relies on uncut hedges. If your farm is small and you don't have many hedges, then it may be possible to come to an agreement with your neighbours so that, together, you ensure that there are always uncut hedges in the area.

**Q 16. Should I treat all hedges on my farm the same way, or should I go for variety?**

Different wildlife likes different sizes and shapes of hedge, so try and create as much variety as possible. Overall, favour large, dense, infrequently cut hedgerows.

As a general rule, the wider and taller a hedgerow is, the more wildlife it has, so try and manage most of your hedges so they become as big as possible. Dormice and turtle doves, for example, need big hedgerows, preferably at least 4 m high. But keep some hedges short (less than 2 m high)

for birds such as yellowhammers, linnets, whitethroats and partridges; and where surrounding land is used by breeding waders such as lapwing, snipe and redshank.

Variety in hedgerow shape is also good. 'A-shaped' hedges may suit the widest range of breeding birds (although the jury is still out on this), but box-shaped ones (with narrower bases than A-shapes) may be better for plants growing on the ground or bank.

Let some hedgerows grow up, either to become lines of trees, or to reach the right condition for laying or coppicing, or for cutting back with a shaping saw (see Q 5). This will add diversity.

**Q 17. Why do farmers not leave more saplings to become hedgerow trees?**

Hedgerow trees can cost a farmer money and provide little, if any, income. The costs of hedge cutting may be increased substantially by the extra time and effort needed to avoid trees growing in hedgerows. They can also shade out crops and grass, so causing further economic loss. In some cases, a hedgerow tree will shade out the hedgerow plants that surround it, so creating gaps. Some trees may also require expensive surgery to reduce the risk they pose to vehicles and people. Others may obstruct farm machinery and overhead telephone and power lines.

Tree Tag on Dartmoor farm. Rob Wolton/Natural England



The fact that there are so many hedgerow trees left, and that some new ones are being planted or left to grow on, is proof that many farmers are prepared to look after the environment, even where it costs them money. There is currently very little financial assistance available to plant or maintain hedgerow trees.

**Q 18. What should I do about hedges alongside roads, and where there are visibility and safety issues?**

Land owners and occupiers are required by law to trim any hedge next to a road, footway, cycleway or public right of way where the growth is preventing the passage, or affecting the safety, of the highway user, including cyclists and pedestrians.

Primrose on hedgebank. Rob Wolton/Natural England



The debris from cutting must also be cleared away. Often it will be safe to limit annual or early cutting to places where the verge is narrow, to junctions and entrances, and to the inside of bends. Even here, it is usually only necessary to trim the near-side, leaving the top and far-side to grow on.

If you do need to cut a hedgerow every year, try and avoid cutting the grass and other plants at the base each time, particularly in the autumn. Instead, cut this vegetation once every two or three years. The majority of insects and other invertebrates that live in hedgerows overwinter in their bases and will be harmed by the cutting of this low-growing vegetation.

Blackthorn in flower. Rob Wolton/Natural England

