

Why are hedgerows so important?

Over the past half a century, industrial farming practices have spread across much of the British countryside.

As a result, the UK has lost many of its hedgerows.

By making space for larger vehicles and enabling the mass mechanisation of post-war farming, the Government has overseen a dramatic reduction in the number of hedges on farmland, and in some cases, 50% of hedgerows have been destroyed (<https://ww2.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/advice/conservation-land-management-advice/farm-hedges/history-of-hedgerows>).

Now, with just over 450,000km (<https://ww2.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/advice/conservation-land-management-advice/farm-hedges/history-of-hedgerows>) of hedgerow left in the UK, it's vital that we begin protecting and replanting our hedgerows both at home and on our farmland. Learn more about the amazing benefits that hedges provide and how you can help to protect them.

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What makes hedgerows so important?

Benefits for wildlife

The UK's hedgerows bustle with life. In fact, 130 of the wildlife species listed as priorities under the government's Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) live and thrive in hedgerows including:

- the harvest mouse
- foraging bats
- roosting birds

Hedgehogs - the nation's favourite animal that call hedges their home:

We can't talk about hedgerows without mentioning their most famous inhabitant - the humble hedgehog. As the name suggests, hedgerows are a really important habitat for the much loved European hedgehog. As omnivores, hedgehogs thrive on the dietary offerings that hedgerows provide - mice, frogs, worms, caterpillars, slugs, and toads, as well as plants and fruits. What's more, hedgerows provide a safe shelter for hedgehogs to

move around, and hibernate during the winter.

Hedgehogs are an important 'indicator species', meaning that their health is reflective of our ecosystem's health in general - a decline in hedgehogs is, in turn, likely to reflect a reduction in vital habitats and the insect population too.



Hedgerows are filled with all manner of other plants which can help support wildlife too, such as brambles, which produce a sweet nectar that helps sustain bees and butterflies, and berries in autumn which feed birds like song thrushes and yellowhammers.



Support our Hedgerow Appeal

We need your help to plant 2,000 metres of hedgerows at Woodoaks Farm. We have a chance to transform the farm into a vibrant haven for local wildlife, providing vital habitats for a variety of species - alongside other great benefits hedgerows bring for the soil and climate.



Benefits for soils

Beyond the benefits they bring to wildlife, hedgerows play an important role on farmland, ensuring soils remain healthy and reducing the impacts of drought and flooding.

Water run-off from fields can be a big problem on farms – during periods of heavy rainfall, a deluge can wash fertile farming soil away, into rivers and seas. One inch of soil takes over 500 years to form, so protecting it is really important.

“ The UK has lost 84% of its fertile topsoil since 1850 – soil degradation and erosion in England and Wales costs £1.2 billion every year! ”

Hedgerows act as a barrier at the margins of farmer's fields to prevent this soil from being lost.

Similarly, keeping the land covered with the canopies of hedgerows, trees, and cover crops, helps farmers reduce the impact that direct rainfall has on the land.

What's more, the deep root structures of hedges and trees on farmland also help to keep soil firmly in place, reducing the risk of it being blown away and eroded during dry months and high winds.

Benefits for the climate

There is a growing consensus that hedgerows can make a real contribution to the UK's target of producing net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

(<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/feb/02/reservoirs-of-life-hedgerows-help-uk-net-zero-2050-aoe>) The

diverse range of plant life in hedges can also

help combat climate change

(http://epsc413.wustl.edu/Lal2004_Geoderma.pdf) by storing carbon in their vegetation.

Implementing more agroforestry (trees on farms) (</causes-campaigns/agroforestry/>) across the UK will be an important part of the UK's reforestation efforts.

Another reason hedgerows are a vital tool in the fight to slow down climate change is that healthier soils store more carbon. The impacts of erosion on unhealthy soils means that they can quickly become a source of carbon dioxide emissions, so by maintaining good root structures and covering the land through hedges and tree, farmers can help develop stronger, more fertile soils.



How you can help

1. Plant more hedges at home

Hedges aren't just important for wildlife on farms. In urban and residential areas too, they provide a safe habitat for wildlife to nest, breed, hibernate and travel, and offer a crucial food source in months of scarcity. If you're planning changes to your garden at home, or are making plans for a new home, consider a hedgerow rather than a fence.

Which type of hedges should I plant for wildlife?

Different hedge sizes, types and features are of value to different species, so to optimise your hedges for wildlife, make sure you have a varied character along their length, to attract a wider range of wildlife. A good shrub layer and growth at the base is of great benefit to many species including hedgehogs, amphibians and reptiles. When choosing varieties to plant as hedgerows, native plant species are important for attracting UK wildlife.

Our top choices for hedgerow plants and trees are:

- Hawthorn – a very popular choice for hedgerows, hawthorn grows very dense, and provides a good home for mammals like hedgehogs, as well as toads and birds. They also produce juicy red berries, which are popular with blackbirds and thrushes.
- Sea buckthorn – this spiny, native UK plant is mostly found in coastal regions. Displaying bright orange berries in autumn, buckthorn provides an important food source for birds over the winter.
- Crab apple – this fruit tree is great for nesting birds, as well as pollinators and a variety of insects. Did you know, up to 90 species of insects have been found to call crabapple trees their home. The tree's bitter fruits are also eaten by small birds and mammals.
- Wild cherry – these beautiful, blossoming trees look great as part of a hedgerow, and are great for pollinators too. The cherries they produce are popular with birds.
- Elder – dormice and voles enjoy elderberries, whilst flowers provide a source of nectar for pollinators.

Other top tips for maximising your garden hedges for wildlife:

- Don't tidy too much - Leave leaf litter & seed heads along the ground - these provide a home for countless insects
- Trim in winter, not in nesting season (between March & August). Trimming your hedgerows in the wrong season can disrupt this vital habitat and possibly cause damage to nesting sites

2. Be mindful when foraging

Summer and autumn is the perfect time for foraging, and the UK's hedgerows offer up a bounty of goodies for the hawk-eyed hedge raider! Yet it's important to remember that, however tasty these herbs and berries are, they're also a shared food source for other creatures. Make sure not to take more than you need, leaving plenty for your nature-based neighbours.

3. Support agroecological farming, like organic

Whilst many hedgerows are protected by law (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/countryside-hedgerows-regulation-and-management>), the activity that occurs around them is having a big impact. 41% of Britain's wildlife species have declined since 1970 and more than one in ten are currently facing extinction. Intensive farming practices, and pesticide use in particular, are named as some of the leading drivers of these declines.

By championing and supporting those who are reducing their use of pesticides, like organic farmers, we can turn our hedgerows back into a haven for our wildlife. Research suggests that if all UK farming were organic, pesticide use would drop by 98%!



4. Support our work as a charity

The Soil Association is busy campaigning for greater government support to [help farmers adopt agroecological farming methods \(/causes-campaigns/a-ten-year-transition-to-agroecology/\)](/causes-campaigns/a-ten-year-transition-to-agroecology/). Alongside our policy lobbying work, our Innovative Farmers program supports farmers of all kinds to run on-farm field labs, trialling techniques such as [agroforestry, which can enable farmers to plant more trees and hedgerows \(/causes-campaigns/agroforestry/\)](/causes-campaigns/agroforestry/) on their farms.

Take the pledge - make your garden a wildlife haven

Will you take a pledge for our planet? Making some nature-friendly changes to your garden can have a huge positive impact for wildlife. Join the growing movement of nature lovers around the UK today



