

Hedges fit for birds and bees

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What is in a hedge? Let's start at the top. Three large native Irish trees are frequently found in hedges – oak, ash and willow provide a habitat for numerous invertebrates as well as birds such as the two Irish owls – barn owl and long-eared owl.

Whether you like it or not, ivy is a plant of immense biodiversity value which provides nest sites for bats and birds. Its flowers in September-October are the only source of pollen and nectar to bees and hoverflies at this late time of year.

Subsequently the late ripening berries, still available in January and February, may be the only source of food when all else is gone.

While ivy is not a saprophytic plant that sucks nutrients from host trees, it does add weight to leafless trees in winter trees, making them more susceptible to wind blow, although usually only those already diseased or weakened.

Moving down to the body of the hedge, the most predominant shrub in our native Irish hedges is whitethorn (hawthorn) with white flowers amid green leaves in late May producing haws in autumn.

Such "sceach" or thorn hedges also include blackthorn which has contrasting white flowers on black leafless branches in late March, followed by sloes in autumn.

Deep within these thorny bushes, there is a safe nesting place for songbirds such as blackbirds and thrushes.

Flowering climbers such as bramble or blackberry are a valuable food source for bees and fruit for birds and mammals. The symbiotic relationship between flora and fauna is



Bat



Bee

Whitethorn haws and flowers



Thrush's nest



Holly



Moth



Primrose

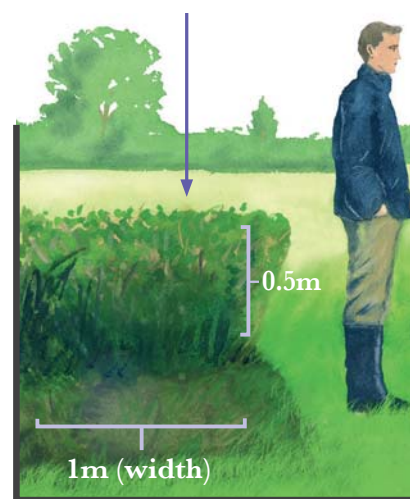


Mouse



Foxglove

Flat top, short back and sides hedge (undesirable)



demonstrated by the evocative scent of honeysuckle or woodbine being emitted only at dusk when moths are on the wing.

The dense base of the hedge is home to small birds such as robins and small mammals including hedgehogs and shrews. In hard weather, this may be the only unfrozen foraging ground, insulated by the leaf litter. Woodland plants such as primrose, fern and foxglove adorn the hedge base. Hedges are networks for nature through the farm and the countryside as birds, bats and bees follow these linear habitats rather than crossing open fields.

Key criteria for routinely trimmed hedges

- At least 1.5m above ground level or top of any hedge bank – for birds to nest and have cover over and under the nest.
- Contain occasional thorn trees for flowers for bees and fruit for birds and small mammals.



Blackbird



Blackthorn sloes



Robin

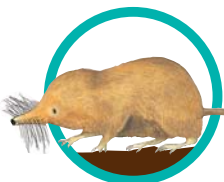
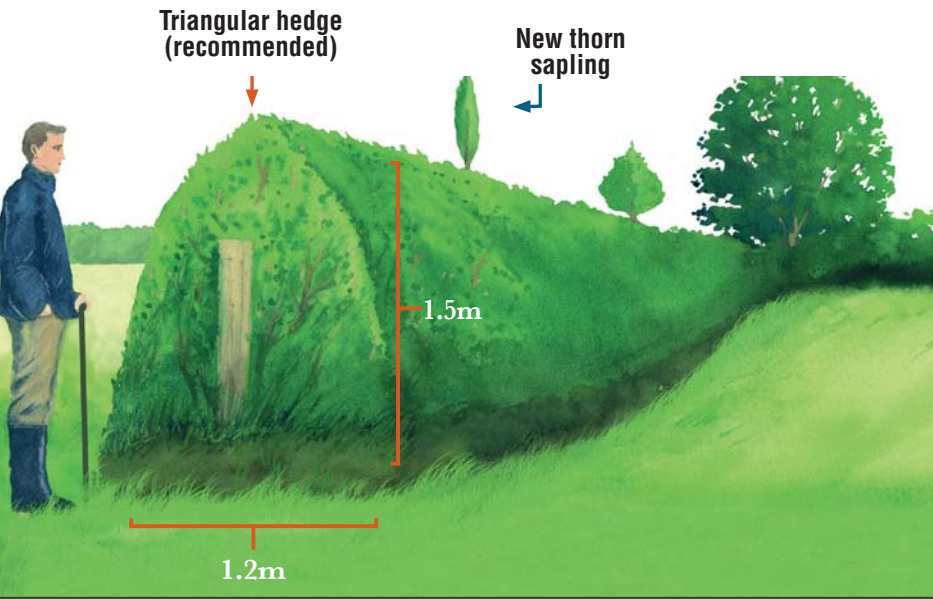
Long-eared owl



Ivy



Butterfly



Shrew



Ash



Woodbine/honeysuckle



Hedgehog

Are your hedges fit for birds and bees?

Hedges are so beneficial the bigger they are, the better. However, it must be remembered that hedges are a man-made habitat. Trees including whitethorn are, by their nature, intended to grow up and mature into a single-stemmed tree with a full canopy.

If the intention is to maintain a hedge, the growing point of each tree must be cut. The ideal is to shape the hedge to a triangular profile from a wide base to a peak. This triangular profile allows light in at the base which encourages dense growth at ground level.

For birds to nest, the hedge must have a dense base and a height of at least 1.5 metres of hedge growth above ground level or the top of the bank. The taller the better, but the height will be limited to the reach of the hedge cutter.

Bees need flowers. There are approximately 100 Irish bees species and one-third are under threat of extinction. A simple way to provide flowers in routinely cut hedges is to allow an occasional thorn tree to grow up and mature as an individual tree with a full canopy. Such individual thorn trees will provide flowers for bees in summer, and fruit for birds and small mammals in autumn.

'Escaped' hedges

Where old hedges have grown into lines of trees with full canopies, these escaped or relict hedges should only be side-trimmed and never topped. Acting as a strip of woodland, they are another extremely valuable habitat especially where outgrowths of shrubs fill in around the individual tree stems. Where the base of escaped hedges has become very thin, laying or coppicing at ground level can rejuvenate.

COMPETITION: Look out for our hedgerow competition. An entry form is included with your latest Teagasc newsletters.