

Technical Information



Making the Most of Cornish Hedges

Hedges are generally the most important wildlife feature on any Cornish farm, and as such need special consideration.

Unfortunately in recent years farmers nation-wide have been encouraged to associate tidy hedges with good farming. This is true of the shrub hedges of the Midlands and South of England, which will if not cut regularly and kept neat become gappy and are not stock-proof. Cornish hedges are different, they are not a line of shrubs across the landscape planted during the enclosures of the last century, they are generally much older and therefore need different treatment. Cornish hedges that are over-managed leave no cover for nesting birds making it easy for magpies and other predators to wreak havoc. Avoid progressive reduction of top growth through annual flailing.

Wildlife

Much of our wildlife depends on hedges for homes, food and a safe means of travel from one habitat to another. Most birds and small mammals rarely move far from the protection of a hedge. Hedges are vertical wild flower meadows, linear woodlands and rockeries, a haven for insect, and plant life. Cornwall Biological Record Unit holds 75,000 records of species recorded in Cornish hedges, 13 of which are Red Data Book (rare) species. Of the 50 or more species of birds which breed commonly on farmland, 30 nest in hedges.

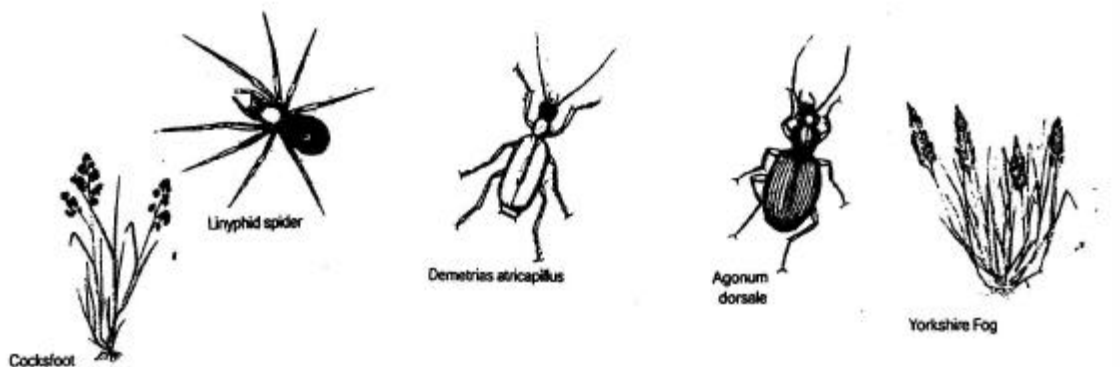
Hedges have other advantages for farmers:-

- **Shelter** - in a windy county any windbreak for crops or stock has to be a big advantage.
- **Erosion** - (do we consider it enough?), soil of cultivated fields is open to the elements, hedges can hinder the downward flow of soil.
- **Screening** - tall Cornish hedges are more in keeping than conifers for hiding ugly buildings etc.
- **Landscape** - small fields, surrounded by thick hedges with the odd scrubby oak or hawthorn are the very character of Cornwall. As such they are highly valued by the public.

Management Guidance.

1. **Cut hedge sides no more than every second year.** In exposed areas trimming may never be necessary as wind and salt will keep growth stunted.
2. **Cut hedge tops no more than every 3 to 5 years.** This will allow shrubs to flower and fruit providing a vital food source for wildlife.

3. **Never 'shave' back to bare earth or stone.** This will damage both the hedge structure and the wildlife.
4. **Aim for a minimum of 1m (3'), of woody top growth.** This will reduce wind speed creating a better windbreak; a hedge with no top growth may create turbulence. Thick shrub growth also provides nesting sites for birds. Although excessive bramble growth is often cited as the reason for annual trimming, more shrubs will help to shade out and smother bramble.
N.B. Tenants should check with their landlord or agent and, if necessary obtain written permission to allow hedges to grow thus avoiding possible claims for dilapidation.
5. **Ideally trim in January or February**, however trimming in November and December is acceptable. Annual trimming is not recommended except for safety reasons (roadside hedges). Do not be tempted to trim field hedges at the same time as road hedges, many birds nest up till the end of August. In arable fields, should an annual trim of the sides of a hedge be essential, at least leave the tops for an extra year or two.
6. **Manage hedges traditionally**, where possible, coppice or lay tall woody growth.
7. **Never spray with herbicide.** The strength of a hedge is in the root system binding it together.
8. **Keep at least 1m (3') alongside every hedge free of fertiliser, slurry, and spray drift**, deflectors and tilting mechanisms are available or drive further from the hedge. This will avoid the nettle and cleaver problem and encourage beneficial insects.
9. **Never plough or spray out hedge bottoms.** Aggressive weeds recover more quickly than desirable species. Insects which prey on aphids over-winter in perennial grasses in the hedge bottom and move out into the crop in the spring.

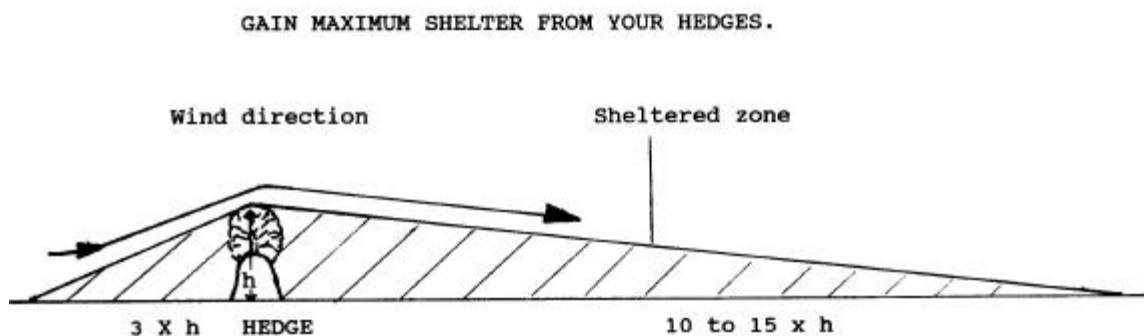


Make hedge bottoms and field margins work for you as 'beetle banks'.

10. **Maintain stone faces**, repair in the local style with local stone wherever possible. Fence to protect from sheep and cattle damage.

11. **Encourage hedgerow trees** where they will not adversely affect crops. Hedge junctions, road or lane hedges and North/South running hedges are good places to allow suitable saplings to grow on.
12. **Resist the urge to keep every hedge tidy.** The odd tall thorn or oak is important to wildlife and creates a more interesting view. Allow 'free growth' on some hedge junctions, farm lane hedges and around poles.
13. **Do not trim all hedges in the same year.** Retain berries and cover for birds; some insects rely on shrub tips to survive the winter.

If correctly managed hedges will remain stock proof with the minimum of fencing.



Historic Value

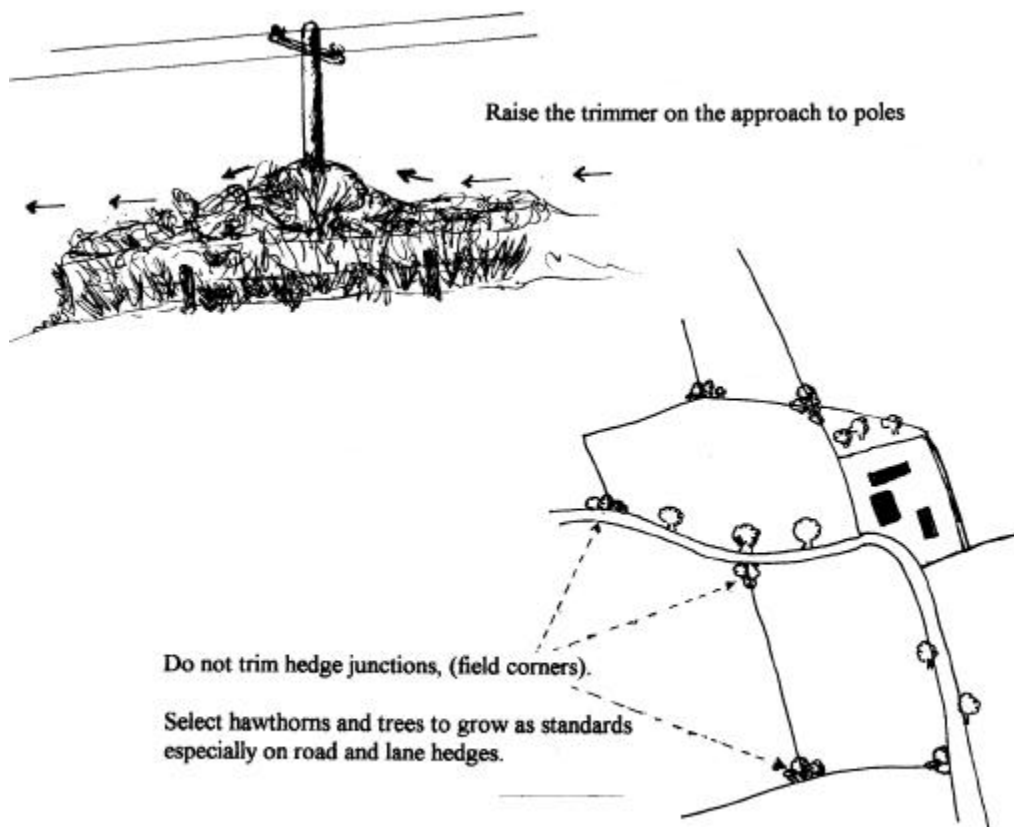
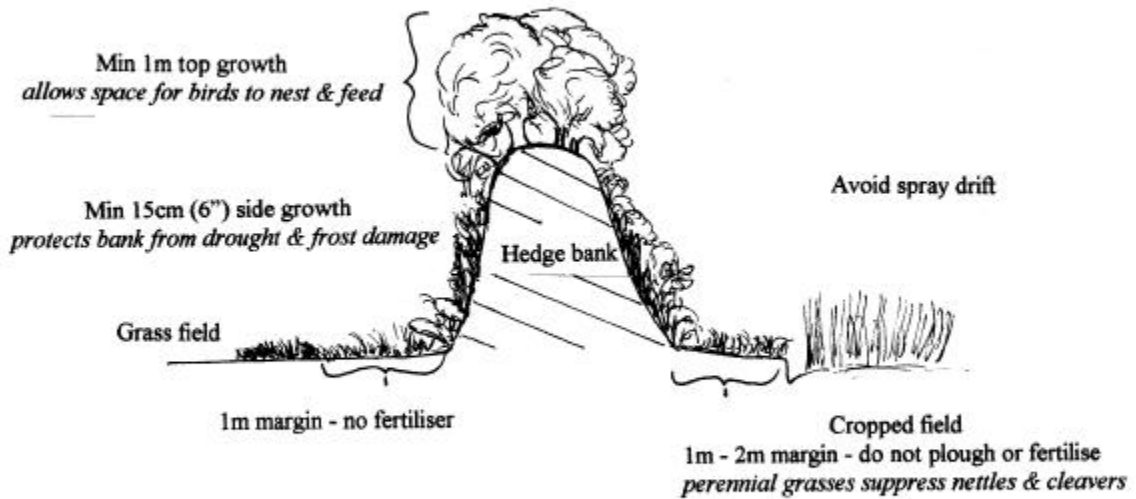
Many Cornish hedges are very ancient although this may be difficult to prove. Some complete field systems can be dated back two thousand years, many others surround fields with Celtic names or have signs of ancient remains (Iron Age rounds). Some fields by their shape can be identified as Anglo-Saxon. Apart from some high ground where land was enclosed more recently it is fairly safe to assume that hedges are hundreds of years old.

Clearing stone from the fields in order to grow crops created the earliest hedges, later hedges were faced with stone often quarried on the farm, and they were and still are multi-purpose. Often a hedge was constructed where the soil changed or where crops would not grow well.

In a windy county with high rainfall the shelter offered by a hedge is vital, for stock, crops and to prevent erosion. It is no coincidence that footpaths are usually on the lea side of a hedge. The plants in a hedge can indicate what the countryside was like before farming, e.g. heather or bilberry - heathland, bluebells and dogs mercury - woodland.

It is not only vermin that live in a hedge, much of the wildlife is beneficial and should be encouraged.

Hedge Management Guidelines



For further help and advice contact:- Cornwall FWAG, Planning, Transportation & Estates, County Hall, Truro TR1 3AY ☎01872 323600