



# Hedgerows in Somerset

As a predominantly farmed landscape Somerset has a rich network of hedgerows and field boundaries. In the upland areas of Exmoor, the Blackdown and Quantock Hills beech hedges dominate, whereas ancient species-rich hedges are common in the agricultural central and South of Somerset. Hedgerows are vital corridors for dispersal and a valuable habitat, also providing benefits such as soil retention, flood prevention and carbon storage and are an important cultural feature of our countryside. This leaflet is designed to give some general information about countryside hedgerows in Somerset and assumes the main reason for surveying or managing a hedgerow is for the benefit of nature.

Content

- A short history of hedgerows in Somerset
- Get to know your local hedgerow
- Planting a hedgerow
- Hedgerow management
- Hedgerows and the law
- Obtaining further advice
- Further reading and references

A short history of hedgerows in Somerset



There is evidence to suggest that during the Bronze and Iron age strips of woodland were left around the earliest field systems, forming the first hedges. Over time, and with changing agricultural needs the field boundaries were adapted to suit new cropping and grazing systems.

It wasn't until the 18th century that the Enclosures Acts were passed, which largely ended the open field system of agriculture, ending a way in which many communities had farmed for centuries. The lands seized were consolidated into individual and privately owned farms with the aim of increasing production to meet the demands of an industrialising nation, so many new hedges were planted to exclude livestock from cropped fields.

In the Blackdown and Mendip Hills, you'll often see regular hedge systems which would indicate planting during the period of Enclosure. These hedges often contain fewer species as commercial nurseries began to cater for this need, churning out hardy species such as hawthorn for planting. The beech hedgebanks of Exmoor, Blackdown and Quantock reflect this. Wide and species-rich hedges around irregular shaped fields are likely to be much older boundaries that have either been

We need to create a **Nature Recovery Network** that extends into every part of our towns, cities and countryside, bringing wildlife and the benefits of a healthy natural world into every part of life. Currently only 10% of Somerset can be classified as being in good natural or semi-natural condition with species-rich natural habitats supporting abundant and diverse wildlife, enabling it to move, reproduce and thrive.

For nature to recover, we need to triple the amount of land managed for nature, creating an interconnected network across our entire county. Land of any size can contribute to the Nature Recovery Network – nature reserves, community spaces, gardens, farms, parks, churchyards and schools. This is why engaging with the planning process is so important.

We need to ensure Neighbourhood plans are developed with nature at their heart and developments take place sustainable, making space for nature to thrive. Local people must step forward to give nature a voice and ensure nature is placed at the heart of all decisions.

planted or cut out of woodland, they could be up to 1000 years old. These ancient and species rich hedges still contain a huge amount of tree genetic diversity. Genetic diversity is a valuable resource as diverse populations are more likely to carry individual variations which may be able to withstand threats such as our changing climate or introduced pests and diseases.

As time passed field systems changes to accommodate roads, canals, and urban expansion. Tens of thousands of hedgerows were removed from the mid-20th century onwards as a result of grants aimed at increasing agricultural efficiency. Hedges also faced biological challenges; Dutch Elm Disease led to the loss of an estimated 2 million trees in Somerset by the mid 1980's. More recently, ash dieback continues to have a devastating impact on the counties woodlands and trees including many of the mature trees which stand with hedge lines.

Ancient and species-rich hedgerows are a now a "priority habitat" in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP). They are also increasingly recognised for their value in flood defence – particularly the banked style common in the South West – soil protect and carbon storage as well as fulfilling their original purpose as a stock proof barrier. The main reason for hedgerow decline today is not direct removal but that they have fallen out of the traditional management cycle, which for many centuries saw hedges managed according to their inherent lifecycle. This may mean they have stood too long without any management losing their shrubby structure, slowly turning into lines of trees, or that they have been trimmed to the same height repeatedly year on year.

Traditional hedges are characteristic to the region and there are many locally distinctive features including the vegetation type, the way they are laid, the presence of ditches and mounds, the number of trees and even the language used to describe them.

Get to know your hedgerow

Understanding your hedge is important first step to creating an effective management plan. PTES run two standardised methods for surveying your hedge, which provide a health check and give tailored management advice:

*Healthy Hedgerows* is a rapid hedgerow health-checker which places each hedge you survey in the lifecycle and gives you instant management options. It has been designed for farmers and landowners that want to understand their whole hedge network and create a hedge management plan at the farm scale.

*The Great British Hedgerow Survey* offers a more in-depth assessment of our hedgerows. Each survey takes a little more time but generates more detailed feedback both in terms of hedgerow health and management advice. Data from both surveys is collated on a national scale that will reveal trends about hedge health.

The value of a hedge for wildlife directly relates to it's management. Hedges with a mix of native species such as hawthorn, hazel and blackthorn can support many hundreds of

invertebrates including dead wood species and pollinators. Bumblebees rely on several structural components to support all elements of their lifecycle; they will feed on pollen and nectar from the hedge and margins, nest and hibernate in the base or tussocky grass margins and will use hedges as "highways" rather than cross open fields. Studies have shown that the abundance and diversity of bird species are directly related to the management the hedge, with twice as many birds in a 4m high compared to a 2m hedge. The familiar but threatened hedgehog relies on a hedge that has no gaps and is well connected with other habitats to allow them to move freely and avoid exposure to predators.

Recognising and recording the wildlife species that make use of your hedge can help you to better understand it's role within the landscape. Biological records should always be submitted to Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) so that the data can contribute to a countywide understanding of our wildlife and be used to inform better decision making in the future.

Planting or replacing a Hedgerow

Hedges are generally a better choice of boundary for wildlife than fences or walls, especially if native trees and shrubs are used. Planting a hedgerow is a wonderful way to increase the biodiversity value of farmed land, a larger garden or community space such as park of school field.

The best hedges for wildlife contain a range of woody species such as hawthorn, blackthorn, field maple, hazel, spindle, wayfaring tree and wild service tree as well as standards such as oak. Rambling plants such as bramble, ivy, rose, climbing honeysuckle and wild clematis provide interest and value for pollinators. Always chose locally appropriate species from native stock. The more local the provenance the better.

The best time for planting is between November and March, but never plant into waterlogged or frozen ground. There are many grants available for both communities and landowners to plant or restore hedgerows. Please see Planning a tree planting project for further guidance.



### Hedgerow management

Hedgerows are a living feature and all require some continued management in order to ensure both their health as a habitat and continued function as boundary. There are many methods for trimming and laying hedges, traditional methods are a real skill so it is well worth investing in further research or training if you are lucky enough to be responsible for managing a traditional hedge.

When managing your hedge for wildlife it's important to consider the lifecycle of the hedge as well as the many species of wildlife which depend upon it. Your surveys will help you make a sound decision about the most appropriate management methods for your hedge, but as a general guide:

- Where possible cut hedges once every two or three years rather than annually. Trees need second year growth in order to bear fruit.
- Try and leave an extra two inches when cutting to allowing the hedge to grow taller and avoiding always stressing the plant at the same point resulting in thick “knuckles” and leggy, gappy hedges.
- Where possible leave trimming until the late winter, ideally January or February. This allows wildlife to make the most of the fruit and nuts and avoids disturbing birds during the main nesting season.
- Plant up gaps to ensure wildlife such as small mammal species can continue to disperse effectively. Always choose an appropriate species of local provenance stock.
- If you can, provide a buffer of ungrazed grassland alongside the hedge. Livestock can damage hedges if allowed to under-graze them and grassland strips provide excellent habitat for invertebrates and small mammals, which in turn attract species such as barn owls.
- Mature hedgerow trees, or “standards”, are a hugely valuable component of your hedge and provide many important niches for wildlife including deadwood invertebrates and bats. Take care when managing your hedge not to damage older trees and make sure you consider allowing some younger trees to grow on for the future.

### Hedgerows and the law

The Hedgerow Regulations set out the laws which protect hedgerows depending on length, location and “importance”. As a general rule within Somerset:

- It is against the law to remove most countryside hedgerows without permission
- You must apply to Somerset County Council for permission to remove a hedgerow. They may take up to 6 weeks to respond.
- If you remove a hedgerow without permission (whether it is classed as “important” or not) you may face an unlimited fine. You may also have to replace the hedgerow.

Additionally many of the species which use hedgerows such as the hazel dormouse, all bat species and all bird species have some level of legal protection.

Within residential areas ornamental hedge boundaries such as box and privet are common. These types of hedge are not the main focus of this leaflet but they still have some value for wildlife providing cover and nesting areas within residential areas. Wherever possible the cutting and pruning of hedges should always take place outside of the main bird breeding period (March - August) regardless of the type or location of hedge as at all British birds, their nests and eggs, are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.



*Brown hairstreak butterfly are largely dependant on hedgerow blackthorns, the caterpillar food plant.*

### Obtaining further advice

**Somerset Hedge Group** promotes responsible hedge management through training, advice, grants and other initiatives. <http://www.somerset-hedgegroup.org.uk/>

**Backdown Hills Hedge Association** provide hedgerow training courses in the Blackdowns <http://bhha.info/>

**Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG SouthWest)** support farmers to maximise the environmental value of their work. [www.fwagsw.org.uk](http://www.fwagsw.org.uk)

**The Peoples Trust for Endangered Species** provide offer free hedgerow training for farm cluster groups. Contact [megan.gimber@ptes.org](mailto:megan.gimber@ptes.org) for expressions of interest.

**Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC)** is the main reference centre for biological and geological information for the county. <http://www.somerc.com/>

### Further reading and references

**Hedgelink** is the partnership working together for the UKs hedgerows. <https://hedgelink.org.uk/>

**Peoples Trust for Endangered Species** provide extensive information about hedgerow ecology, management and Survey: <https://ptes.org/hedgerow/>

**Hedgerow Webinair with Megan Gimber** from the PTES covering hedge wildlife, management, history and surveying available to watch at [www.somersetwildlife.org/wildlife/swt-tv/training](http://www.somersetwildlife.org/wildlife/swt-tv/training)

**TCV Conservation Handbooks Hedging.** Comprehensive guidebook covering history, management and conservation of hedges - purchase required (available free for some Team Wilder communities) <https://www.conservaionhandbooks.com/hedging>  
Hedgerows and the law: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/countryside-hedgerows-regulation-and-management>

**How to plant and manage a hedge**, guidance from the Wildlife Trust <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions/how-make-hedge-wildlife>  
<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife/managing-land-wildlife/how-manage-hedgerow-wildlife>

**General land management guidance** and support from Team Wilder Somerset <https://www.somersetwildlife.org/get-involved/team-wilder>

*Advice sheet compiled by Somerset Wildlife Trust with kind input from Megan Gimber - Key Habitats Projects Officer at PTES - and members of the Blackdown Hills Hedge Association.*

