

Hedgerows

It may not at first glance appear obvious why hedgerows are so important to our allotment site, so it is worth considering what they can offer us and how we can gain most benefit from them.

Sometimes it may seem as if a fence will do the work of a hedge with the benefit of virtually no maintenance. We have a sturdy fence around the site which affords us some security from vandalism and prevents the cattle enjoying our produce, but it does little else. Our fence is also not an attractive addition to the site. Having said that we certainly would not want to be without it. But what it does not do is provide us with protection from the winds that attack our exposed site. Many ploholders have suffered wind damaged crops especially runner beans. The most damage was suffered at the "pond end" of the site where there is just a fence and no hedging. The other three sides of the site have a fence and hedgerow combined so are protected to a degree.

So just what are the advantages that a hedge has over a fence? The most important reason to grow a hedge is that it attracts wildlife but secondary to that is that it will provide a windbreak. Everyone on the allotment site will benefit from the wildlife that our hedges will draw in, and we will be able to appreciate watching the wildlife and knowing that beneficial wildlife is helping us control pests on our plots. To a degree all plot holders will appreciate the windbreak effect the hedges will have, but the allotmenters at the "pond end" will feel this benefit the most. A hedge will also provide some foraging for wild foods such as hazel nuts and blackberries if we can get at them before the wildlife does. But above all a hedge is a thing of beauty especially if it is composed of a good variety of native plants.

During the spring of 2010 the boundary along the "pond end" of the site will be planted up with a hedge of British plants, such as hawthorn, hazel, elder, holly, guelder rose and dogwood. Along its length a few small trees, such as field maple, crab apple and mountain ash, will be grown within the line of the hedge. These will have to be trees that do not grow large enough to cast shadow over plots or take moisture from the soil.



Fruit of crab apple, Malus "Butterball".

The hedging plants are all being sourced from within Shropshire which is of utmost importance. Not only will the plants establish more quickly but they will also thrive better. They will flower and at the expected times of year and thus afford wildlife maximum benefit.

Often hedges alongside our byways contain plants sourced from outside the UK and, even though

they will be of European origin, they may well flower and fruit out of season. This means that we often see hawthorn flowering earlier than expected, which may seem an advantage to us as we enjoy looking at them, but insects especially bees need the flowers to open at the appropriate times. Many species of bird eg. blue tits need their main food source for their young, usually aphids and caterpillars, to be around to coincide with hatching. Creating hedges from non-native plants may well result in such food being available at the wrong time and so the young do not survive and those that do will not thrive.

If one plant had to be chosen as the star of a hedge it would be the dogrose. We can appreciate the beauty of its flowers and the delicacy of their scent and later the jewel-like beauty of its red hips against a pale blue winter sky, but the wildlife will be equally gladdened by its appearance in our hedge. Insects and bees will home in on the flowers and birds and mammals on the hips. We allotmenters may even be tempted to harvest a few to make rosehip syrup.

The trees grown within the hedgerow will provide flowers for bees and insects early in the year and fruit for birds and mammals later on. Rowan can be laden down with red berries in the autumn which will be appreciated by our native members of the thrush family, the blackbird, song thrush and mistle thrush as well as our winter migrants from the colder eastern European mainland, the fieldfares and redwings.

The main hedging plants will provide birds with nest sites especially thrushes and blackbirds, but chiffchaffs and dunnock (hedge sparrows) will nest in the undergrowth below the hedge itself. These birds will also find their food within the hedge and in the undergrowth.

We will need to plant some climbers in the hedge which will provide nest sites as well as a valuable food source, such as ivy, honeysuckle and brambles. If we are lucky our hedgerow may attract long-tailed tits to nest within its climbing plants. The berries of ivy and holly are much appreciated by mammals and birds, but the birds will also appreciate feeding on the insect life attracted to the climbers.



Honeysuckle in berry.

The inclusion of evergreens such as holly and ivy afford wildlife, especially birds, shelter in the harsher periods of the winter months.

Hedges will also attract butterflies which search out food and shelter. Brimstone, speckled wood,

gatekeeper and holly blue are all attracted to native hedges. Butterflies desperately need our help as their numbers have dropped drastically over the last decade or so.

Indirectly our hedgerow will attract birds of prey, such as the kestrel and sparrowhawk, which will feed on the voles and mice living in its base. We may not spot these very often but they add an exciting bit of wildlife drama. A larger mammal, the hedgehog, may snuffle its way hidden in the hedge base enjoying feeding on insects and invertebrates and reducing the slug and snail population for us as a bonus.

One form of life that will appreciate our hedge, but will go about its life without us being aware of its activity, will be bats. They will feed on insects and moths when we have all packed up and gone home for our tea!

Not all wildlife attracted to the hedge will be welcome though – those pesky rabbits will appreciate a nibble of the fresh young bark of our hedge plants when we first plant them. Thus when our plants are delivered they will have rabbit guards provided as part of the package.

And all this at no cost to BAC! The hedging plants and tree guards and canes will be supplied to us as part of a Woodland Trust campaign. We have been granted enough young plants for the whole of the "pond end" fence to be planted up, about 150 metres in total.

The planting of the hedge will be a job for working parties as will its future management. Eventually some shrubs will need to be periodically coppiced, whereas most will need just a trim to keep the desired shape and size. Coppicing will give us stakes to use around the site and the prunings will become brush piles to help widen the developing variety of wildlife habitats.

And finally, one major reason to plant a native hedge is to replace a little of what has been lost to intensive farming and to help the wildlife that has struggled to maintain numbers as a result.