



# Garden hedges

**SUMMARY** Hedges can be attractive and long lasting assets to gardens, giving shelter, privacy and defining boundaries. However using fast growing subjects for quick results can lead to hedges which are hard to handle and become too large. The RHS believes that information to help choose better hedging plants or to select alternatives will help, but will not entirely resolve the problem of high hedges. There is a need for local authorities to be able to act where hedges are a nuisance.



Photo by Guy Barter

## RHS policy statements

- 1 Where appropriate, hedges are often the best solution for providing gardens with privacy and shelter. They are environmentally beneficial, both for wildlife and as an entirely renewable resource.
- 2 The RHS recognises that hedges are often not a suitable solution for garden boundaries under modern conditions, and suggests that gardeners consider fences, where long term hedge care and size restriction are not possible.
- 3 Where hedges are appropriate, gardeners will benefit by choosing subjects that will not grow too large, or require more maintenance than can be given. The RHS recommends that this information be made freely available and has published its guide to hedges on the Internet.
- 4 Although removal and replacement of large hedges can lead to great expense, inconvenience and loss of privacy, the RHS recommends that they be dealt with, as in the long run, a better garden for the owner and improved local environment will result.
- 5 The RHS encourages the government to introduce legislation giving local authorities the power to intervene in disputes between neighbours over high hedges in a fair way, avoiding fueling disputes between neighbours.

# Garden hedges



Photo by Guy Barter

With regular cutting, conifers such as this Leyland cypress makes a perfect hedge



Photo by Guy Barter

Left untended conifer hedges can dwarf properties and shade gardens and windows

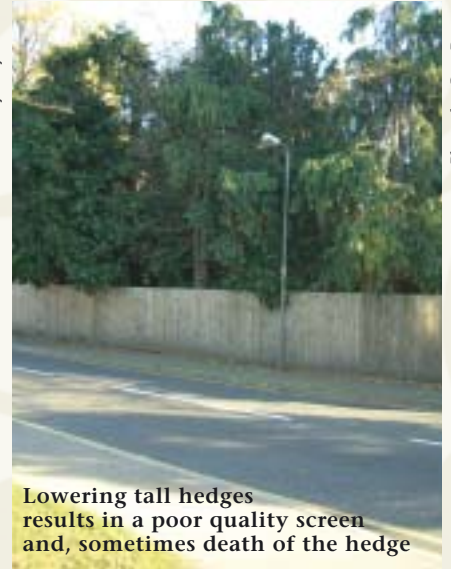


Photo by Guy Barter

Lowering tall hedges results in a poor quality screen and, sometimes death of the hedge

Hedges can cause disputes between neighbours, where the hedge casts shade, spoils views, robs gardens of moisture and nutrients, and spreads into neighbouring properties. High hedges are sometimes deliberately grown, but many are the result of mismanagement and neglect. Although intruding growth can be cut back to the boundaries, neighbours have no other rights to reduce tall hedges.

Leyland cypress (*Cupressocyparis leylandii*) is especially culpable as it is fast growing, and very widely planted for quick results and has an excellent mossy green or yellow finish, when well cared for. Less vigorous alternatives include hedging cultivars (varieties) of Western red cedar (such as *Thuja plicata* 'Atrovirens') and Lawson's cypress (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Green Hedger').

In modern gardens the space needed for hedges, a desire for quick results and the time taken for their maintenance often make alternatives preferable. If maintaining hedges within reasonable dimensions is going to be difficult it is better to

choose one of the many fencing options available.

Noise exclusion is another reason for tall hedges. Hedges can absorb as much as 8–10 percent of noise, and placing hedges between gardens and roads apparently has a beneficial psychological effect! This level of noise interception is disappointing, and reflection of noise by solid barriers, is likely to be at least as effective.



Photo by Guy Barter

Although these hedges provide privacy and reduce noise from nearby roads they have become too large to maintain, and the upper half is out of hand and cannot be cut successfully back



Photo by Guy Barter

Hedges are not always the answer to garden boundaries and divisions; there are many different fencing options available, where space or time to maintain hedges is lacking

## Garden benefits

Hedges are important traditional garden features and the RHS encourages their use where there is adequate space for them to grow and where there are resources to maintain them. Skilfully selecting the right plants for the site and soil, and keeping them shapely and within bounds, results in valuable garden features. For a long lived hedge, with few losses and gaps, plants should suit the site and the soil.

Hedges are a cost effective, long lasting, low maintenance way of marking boundaries and dividing land. They can provide shelter and privacy with little input of fertiliser, water or labour. They are longer lasting and often give better shelter than fences. Solid fences, while providing most privacy, encourage air turbulence which is as damaging as lack of shelter. Vegetation filters airflow with less turbulence. A 50 percent air flow is ideal. Where fences are essential use 'interference' type fences that are porous, but maintain privacy, by using boards fixed on both sides of the post, the planks on one side covering the gaps on the other side of the fence.

### Garden drawbacks

Gardeners should be aware that tall hedges can be time consuming and laborious to maintain. Keeping hedges to sensible heights, no greater than eye level for example, can eliminate working above head heights, and from ladders and platforms. Hedges can be damaged where insufficient soil moisture is available. Leyland cypress hedges lose foliage in patches and cherry laurel hedges develop mildew for example. Like any tree and shrub, mulching,

feeding and watering may be required, especially in the early stages of growing a hedge.

Good growing conditions minimise the time taken for small, cheap hedging plants to reach a useful size. Three years are likely to be needed before even the fastest growing hedge attains useful dimensions.

Planting larger trees than the 50cm ones usually used for hedges can produce a hedge more quickly, but is costly, requires staking and often some windbreak protection, and a high standard of aftercare, especially watering, for good results.

Photo by Guy Barter



Weed free, fertile soil and wind protection improve hedge growth, so that this hornbeam hedge is a fast growing, easy to manage alternative to conifer hedges

### Hedges for wildlife

Hedges provide shelter and food for insects, small mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians. Native hedging plants are the most valuable for wildlife. Find common ones in your area with The Postcode Plants Database ([www.nhm.ac.uk/science/projects/fff](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/science/projects/fff)).

Ideally, hedges that contain native species should be pruned in late winter so that wildlife can take advantage of the insects, fruits and

buds that native species of hedge plants provide during the winter.

To protect birds, wildlife hedges should not be trimmed in the nesting season from March to August. Garden hedges are less valuable to wildlife and pruning them at other times is unlikely to be harmful.

### Avoiding outside hedges

Finding the ideal hedging plant from the bewildering choice available is not easy. The horticultural advisory service of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) can provide details of plant choice, sources of plants, including mature ones, and sources of suitable machinery. Other sources of information are listed below.

Slow growing plants, do not pose much risk of getting out of control, but take more time to fulfil their function than quicker growing subjects. Soil preparation with organic matter and fertiliser can speed the growth of even slow growing hedge plants such as yew. Fencing can provide shelter and privacy, while slow growing hedges attain a useful size. This may take three to seven years. Quick growing plants produce a hedge in a shorter time but need trimming up to three times a year, compared to the annual trim that slow growing plants require.

If being overlooked from a distance or from raised viewpoints is a concern, positioning plants within the garden to intercept lines of sight is often as effective as tall perimeter hedges.

Where vigorous hedges are essential, plant closely, as competition between plants will limit eventual size, compared to more widely planted hedges. Planting should be done well within boundaries, so that growth does not spread into neighbouring properties. Resources to maintain

Photo by Guy Barter



Hedges can grow quickly - this hornbeam hedge is three years old, and, unlike conifer hedges, can be pruned with impunity



Conifer hedges, unlike deciduous ones, seldom re-grow when cut back into old dead wood

Photo by Peter Anderson/Dorling Kindersley

by up to a third. Where greater reduction is required, reducing their height by a third, and then leaving them to recover for a few years before reducing their height by a further 25–50 percent is usually successful.

As conifers do not re-sprout from old, brown wood, excessively wide hedges are best replaced by alternative hedging plants or by a fence. Hedges leave impoverished soil when removed, and fertiliser and organic matter should be added before replacement hedges are planted.

### Hedge disputes

When persuasion fails to get an oversize hedge reduced or removed, there are seldom any legal remedies. Landowners may plant hedges without planning or other permission. Occasionally this may be prevented by the deeds of property, or prohibited in some conservation areas. Sometimes an offer to contribute to the costs of reduction, removal or replacement may help achieve the desired effect.

Although arbitration is available to resolve disputes between neighbours, its scope is clearly limited where irreconcilable opinions occur. Local

authorities can provide details of arbitration services.

In some cases a legal right exists to views or light, that can be used to enforce reduction of hedges. Acquiring a ‘right to light’ is possible, where uninterrupted light has been enjoyed for at least 20 years. This applies only to buildings, including greenhouses, but not to gardens. Also, there is no right to the same amount of light, just that sufficient light should remain to allow the building to be used in the way it was previously used.

Gardeners are entitled to remove plant material that crosses the garden boundary; this includes roots, but not so much root that the hedge’s health or stability is undermined! Any material removed remains the hedge owner’s property, and must be offered back, although they are not obliged to accept it. It is diplomatic to discuss proposed work with the hedge owners before starting.

Sometimes a hedge may be subject to planning controls, in which case it must not be reduced or removed without permission. Local councils can advise on this.

hedges within acceptable dimensions must be available. This may involve finding landscape contractors, purchasing quality powered cutters, mobile platforms to cut hedges from and arrangements for collecting, transport and disposal of the considerable quantities of clippings produced by fast growing hedges.

### Reducing outside hedges

Broad-leaved hedges, both evergreen, such as privet (*Ligustrum ovalifolium*) and deciduous, such as beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), can almost always be heavily pruned to reduce their size.

Spread drastic pruning over two years, shortening one side per year, and dealing with the top in the first year. Heavy pruning is best done in late winter or early spring for evergreen hedges, and in the dormant or leafless period between October and February for deciduous hedges. Hedging plants re-grow well after trimming and quickly look attractive.

Coniferous hedges will not re-grow when trimmed to old bare wood, and may be damaged by sudden, drastic reductions in height. Yew, however, may be treated as suggested for broad-leaved evergreen hedges.

Some reduction of coniferous hedges is possible; if their spread is not excessive, their height can be reduced



Photos by Countax Ltd



Good equipment greatly eases repeated trimming quality hedges need to stay looking good

Despite attempts to introduce legislation, there are currently no legal remedies for the intrusion caused by excessively large hedges. Future legislation is contemplated, but the process of enacting legislation has yet to be started, and no early introduction of legal sanctions is expected. Because legislation has to be fair and avoid making neighbourly disputes even worse, the ways of enforcing and policing regulations will require careful drafting. The RHS is participating in this process.

Hedging legislation is likely to involve guidelines on the acceptability of hedge size in various positions in the garden. This would help gardeners assess the implications of letting their hedge grow tall, and adjust their management regime to avoid conflict. Similarly those affected by a neighbour's high hedges would be able to assess the likelihood of successful complaints.

Draft guidelines have been published by the DETR (Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions):  
[www.urban.odpm.gov.uk/greenspace/trees.height/index.htm](http://www.urban.odpm.gov.uk/greenspace/trees.height/index.htm)

#### Further information:

- *Hedges: Suitable Trees, Shrubs and Conifers*, Royal Horticultural Society, Advisory Leaflet 182, January 2000
- *Defining the limits*, The Garden, March 2000, pp 196–199
- *Divide and Rule*, The Garden, March 2000, pp 206–211
- Hedgeline – support group for those suffering from high hedges in adjacent properties  
Tel: 0121 472 4540  
[www.hedgeline.org](http://www.hedgeline.org)
- *Cypress Hedges: Potential Problems & Suitable Solutions*, The London Tree Officers Association (LTOA): The leaflet is available for 25p plus a stamped and addressed envelope by calling  
Tel: 020 7974 4124
- *Hedging Review*, Gardening Which?, November 2002, pp 432–441
- *The Right Hedge For You*, ODPM Free Literature, PO Box 236, Wetherby LS23 7NB,  
E-mail [ODPM@twoten.press.net](mailto:ODPM@twoten.press.net),  
Tel 0870 1226236,  
Fax 0870 1226237,  
Textphone 0870 1207405

#### Websites:

*The right hedge for you: a guide to choosing a garden hedge:*

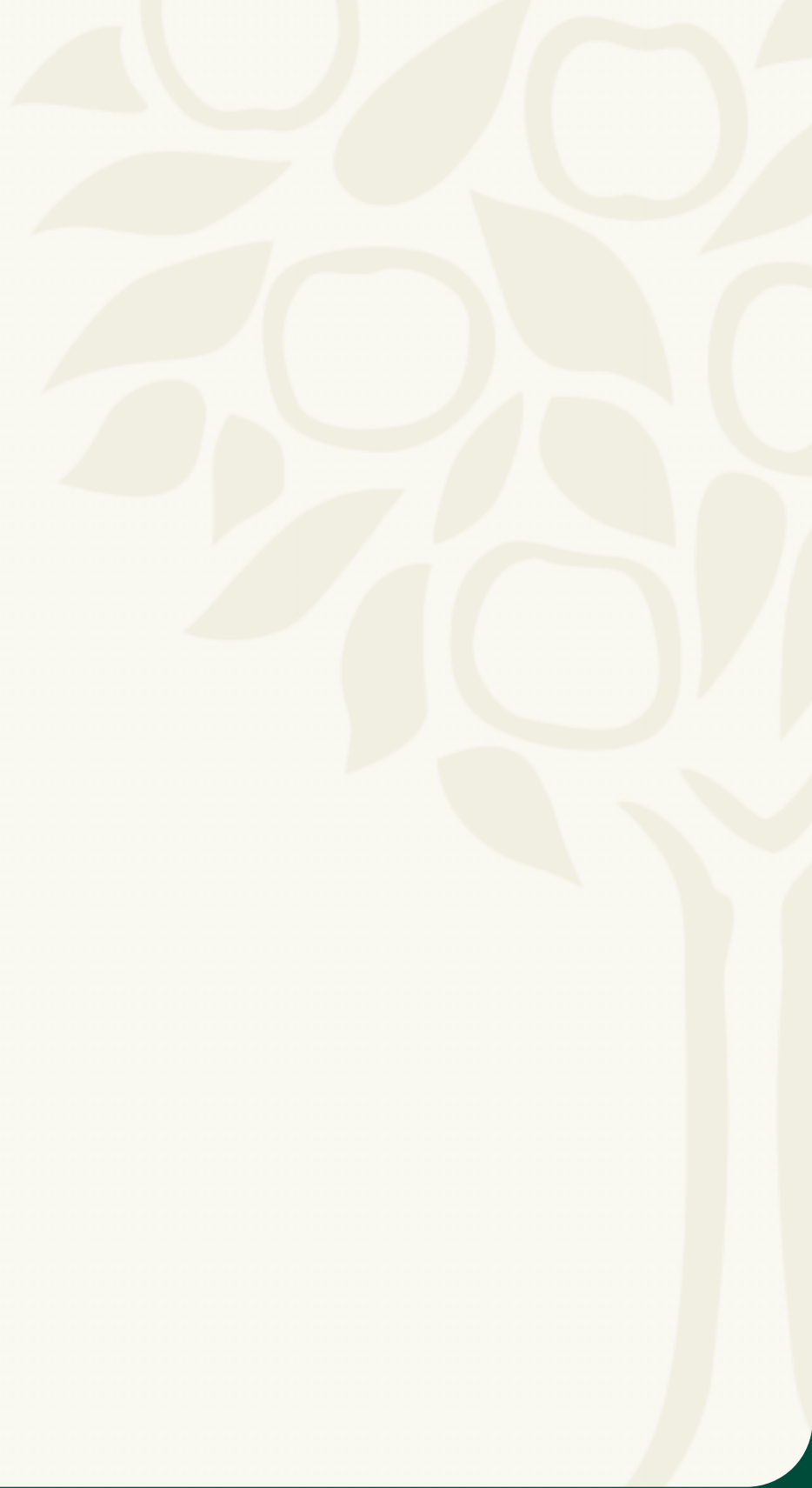
[www.urban.odpm.gov.uk/greenspace/trees/gardenhedges/index.htm](http://www.urban.odpm.gov.uk/greenspace/trees/gardenhedges/index.htm)

*Current news and background information on problem hedges:*

[www.urban.odpm.gov.uk/greenspace/trees/index.htm](http://www.urban.odpm.gov.uk/greenspace/trees/index.htm)

*Details of the law relating to trees and hedges:*

[www.treesource.co.uk/index2.htm](http://www.treesource.co.uk/index2.htm)



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