

THE RIGHT HEDGE FOR YOU: A GUIDE TO CHOOSING A GARDEN HEDGE

The right hedge can be an ideal garden boundary, but the wrong hedge may bring problems. Use this information to help you choose the best hedge for your garden.

Why plant a hedge?

A good hedge has many benefits as a garden boundary:

- shelter, reducing wind strength better than a solid barrier
- filter, absorbing dust and noise
- privacy, as an effective visual screen
- security, a prickly hedge is a great deterrent
- beauty and interest from seasonal changes
- background texture and colour complement other plants
- wildlife, food and shelter for insects, birds and mammals
- weather-resistance much better than fences
- money saving compared with most fencing
- long-lived, hedges can last hundreds of years

When deciding to plant a hedge you also need to think about:

Maintenance

A hedge requires a commitment to regular maintenance. All types need trimming at least once a year, others more often. Regular light pruning is better for the hedge, and easier to carry out, than infrequent heavy pruning. Modern power tools do the job quickly when the hedge is trimmed regularly. High and overgrown hedges often need costly specialist equipment or professional help to get them back into shape - and create a huge heap of garden waste to dispose of.

Time to establish

Add a temporary screen of fine netting or windbreak material to create privacy while the hedge grows. A faster growing variety which establishes more quickly might not be suitable in the longer term as it keeps on growing.

Ability to outgrow the site or cause damage

Avoid the problems which can be caused by a hedge which gets too big for its situation by choosing the right plants.

Making the right choice

The many benefits of growing hedges on your boundary depend on selecting the right plants for the situation. If you choose an unsuitable variety you could be faced with a range of problems, especially if the hedge grows too big. It will be difficult to trim and may cut out light to your garden or house.

Its roots could deprive other plants of water and nutrients, and even interfere with paths and buildings. Oversize hedges will intrude on your garden space, and may cause problems with neighbours. Oversize hedges can be costly and time consuming to cut back and most conifers, including Leyland and Lawson's cypress, will not tolerate hard pruning. If the hedge borders a road or path the local authority could get involved, and insist the hedge is cut back.

Luckily there is a wide range of plants available so it's not difficult to achieve an attractive healthy hedge - one which will take only as much upkeep as you can manage, and create an attractive feature in your neighbourhood, not a bone of contention.

How to choose

Step one

Think about why you want a hedge, e.g. for security, privacy or boundary marker. Choose the features that fit the type of hedge you want. Think about leaf colour, flowers, fruit, prickles, autumn interest, wind and salt tolerance.

Step two

Decide how much maintenance work you can manage, as it will require a continuing commitment. Some hedges are fine with one cut a year, others need at least three. Fast-growing hedges don't stop at the height you want, so you must remove a lot of growth every year. Slow-growing hedges are much less effort.

Step three

Most plants listed can be trimmed to make a hedge 1.5 - 2m (5 -7ft) tall and most will grow on any reasonable garden soil and in most parts of the country. For more help with local suitability, planting and maintenance consult your garden centre or plant nursery.

Step four

Discuss the location of a boundary hedge and its continuing maintenance requirements with your neighbours. All sides of a hedge will need to be regularly trimmed if it is to be properly maintained and parts of it may only be accessible from your neighbour's garden.

Step five

It would be advisable to check with your house deeds and Secretary to the Planning Committee at Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture for any planning conditions or covenants which apply to your garden and may affect your choice of hedge.