

Managing hedges to benefit pollinators

Hedges are often vital for healthy, diverse wild pollinator populations in farmland. Hedges attract and support pollinators, boosting their numbers. In turn, these pollinators move into field and orchards to improve pollination of crops such as oilseed rape, legumes and fruits resulting in increased yields. They also increase the size of fruit produced by hedge plants and this provides winter food for birds.

This leaflet complements the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) guide *Pollinator management for your farm business*.

This guidance aims to help make the most of hedges on farm, including those counted as Ecological Focus Area (EFA), and so demonstrate farming's support for CFE and the National Pollinator Strategy. This guidance aims to help make the most of Ecological Focus Area (EFA) hedgerows and so demonstrate farming's support for CFE and the National Pollinator Strategy.



Why are hedges good for pollinators?

Healthy populations of pollinators need three things:



1. Good sources of pollen and nectar for food from spring to autumn.

- In early spring, willow catkins (pussy willow) and blackthorn flowers are especially important, when few other flowers are available. They are particularly valuable for queen bumblebees. Other shrubs and trees, including hawthorn (May blossom), crab apple, wild cherry and wild plum, provide rich pickings for many pollinators later in spring.
- In summer, flowers of hedgerow margins are important for pollinators, especially when crops are not in flower. Most crops only flower for a few weeks, but hedges can help meet pollinators' needs for the rest of the flying season. During droughts, flowers growing in hedges alongside ditches are the only ones available.
- In the autumn, ivy provides copious nectar and pollen.



2. Safe places to breed and overwinter

- Holes created by mice, voles and other animals at the base of hedges or in banks, together with tussocky grasses in nearby margins, provide excellent bumblebee nesting places. Open fields provide few such opportunities. Many solitary bees nest in holes in patches of short turf or bare earth in hedge banks, in hollow stems, e.g. dead bramble, or in holes in dead wood.
- Hedges provide an abundance of breeding habitat for a wide range of pollinators. For example, they provide food plants for butterfly and moth caterpillars, and the aphids or rotting vegetation upon which most hoverfly larvae depend.
- The same features provide safe places for pollinators to overwinter, as eggs, larvae, pupae or adults.



3. Safe flyways

- Few pollinators like moving across open country when looking for flowers or returning to their nests. Instead they follow linear landscape features like hedges, where they are sheltered from wind and rain, and safer from predators. This applies even to large insects like bumblebees.

What you can do

1. Provide nectar and pollen sources for food from spring to autumn

- Allow hedge shrubs and trees to flower by cutting them on a three year rotation – cutting no more than a third of hedges in any year. Cutting only once every three years results in 2.5 times more hawthorn and blackthorn flowers than cutting every year. Alternatively, if cutting annually, raise the cutting height by 10 cm (4 inches) each time. Leaving a few uncut bramble and rose outgrowths will be beneficial.
- Plant a range of native flowering shrubs (including goat willow, grey willow, hawthorn, blackthorn, crab apple) in any hedge gaps or when planting new hedges. Honeysuckle is particularly important for long-tongued bumblebees.
- Carefully cultivate flower-rich strips, particularly on sheltered south-facing hedge sides, where existing margins lack flowers. Place these between tussocky grass cross-compliance margins and the crop. Avoid heavy grazing and only cut after flowering. Flowers such as knapweed, vetches and woundwort are good for bees, while hogweed, rough chervil, wild angelica and wild parsnip are especially good for hoverflies. Protect hedge-bottoms and margins from drift of fertilisers or pesticides.



2. Provide safe places to breed and overwinter

- Encourage tussocky grass (e.g. cock's-foot) by not cutting grass margins close to a hedge unless it is to control scrub. Cut as late in the year as possible to protect nesting bumblebees.
- Leave patches of dead bramble stems and piles of dead twigs and branches.
- Maintain banks in good condition, mostly well-vegetated to prevent erosion, but with areas of short turf and small patches of bare ground on sunny sheltered sides.

3. Provide safe flyways

- Plant up large gaps in hedges, and plant new hedges, to ensure good landscape connections.
- Lay or coppice hedges when they become gappy to rejuvenate them. This will keep them healthy and ensure they survive long into the future.

Further guidance:

- Hedgelink provides a wide range of guidance on hedge management. See www.hedgelink.org.uk
- The CFE website shows farmers how establishing CFE Voluntary Measures on fallow or unproductive land will benefit pollinators. See www.cfeonline.org.uk/campaign-themes/pollinators
- Hedgerows form part of a package of Countryside Stewardship options designed to benefit wild pollinators, farmland birds and other farm wildlife, known as the Wild Pollinator and Farm Wildlife Packages. The Hedgerows and Boundaries Capital also offers funding for small-scale restoration of boundary features. See www.gov.uk
- More information on simple actions for pollinators can be found at www.wildlifetrusts.org/Bees-needs



All hedges need to be rejuvenated by laying or coppicing to avoid too many gaps

Image credits

All images are from Rob Wolton