

Hedging your bets

Steve Moul makes the case for considering a traditional hedge as opposed to a fence or a wall when looking at boundaries

Fence, wall or something else? Choosing the right solution for a boundary has long caused headaches and on occasion heartache. Sometimes people, including the 'expert' landscape architects, planners and designers overlook what could easily be the best solution of all – a hedge.

Hedging offers many benefits, among them:

- **Practicality and privacy**

A wall or a fence can normally only provide cover up to six feet. Planning laws and at times, those of Physics may prevent any fence or wall from being over six feet tall in order to avoid a potential eyesore.

The right kind of hedge can start at six feet or more and will gradually increase your cover until it reaches the desired height. It goes without saying that a well maintained hedge should last a lifetime, whereas many fences will need replacing every few years and walls will need re-pointing and repair.

- **Natural beauty**

Hedges offer a softer, more natural boundary than walling or fencing. Where a boundary

extends along the entire frontage of a large estate or golf course, perhaps several hundred metres in length the contrast between hedging and a hard landscaped boundary can be huge. Who wants a prison wall look?

- **Security**

Choosing a prickly hedge such as Holly, Hawthorn or Pyracantha can be an amazingly effective deterrent to someone who wants to enter your property unlawfully.

- **Nature and wildlife**

Hedges can be an excellent habitat for many creatures and can give shelter and food throughout the seasons. Birds especially love to pick on the berries of holly and hawthorn and the invertebrates that thrive in hedges.

- **Noise and wind shelter**

Solid walls and fences simply deflect the wind upwards and over, hedges absorb the wind and calm it.

The extra height and thickness of a hedge is an extremely effective way of filtering out high noise levels and providing increased shelter from cold winds.



• **Planning**

It may be your only option as many planners are now insisting on hedges instead of walls or fences in order to soften the effect of any new development on the environment. Planners will also stipulate a minimum initial height and may even specify the type of plants to use.

Once you have decided to install a hedge, there are many other things to consider before planting. The choice of plants is critical and making the right decision depends upon a number of factors.

Key factors that should be considered are:

- 1. Function of the hedge**
Is this a formal hedge, what is its primary purpose and at what height will it ultimately need to be maintained at?
- 2. Evergreen or deciduous**
Consider the desired appearance and function of the hedge throughout the year.
- 3. Budget**
This could easily be the number one factor to consider for many people as we all have

to work to a budget. However, beware the false economy of buying cheap, poor quality plants.

Ask the supplier to show you evidence of the quality of plants you can expect to receive.

- 4. Soil type and location**
Most common hedging plants are very hardy and tolerant of a wide range of conditions, but some will do better than others in certain soils and aspects.

Light levels and any overhanging foliage will have the biggest effect on the plants.

Ask for advice on how to improve the soil from your supplier.

- 5. Nearby trees, foundations and waterways**
Any of these things can affect levels of moisture that make it to the roots of newly planted hedges.

Concrete footings and tree root systems can reduce water levels, but nearby streams and rivers can raise water tables in a way that may not be visible on the soil surface.

Good knowledge of local conditions is advised in order to ascertain whether a hedge is the correct option.

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6. Are you planting the hedge?

Planting a large hedge is labour intensive. Large root-balled trees can weigh up to and above 100kg each. Do you have the right equipment to unload the plants, dig a trench, move the plants around and lift them in?

Plants can easily be damaged by mishandling. This could require at least two pieces of specialist equipment such as a Manitou forklift and a large excavator. Some hedge suppliers will offer a planting service which includes all of the appropriate machinery and knowledge involved in giving the hedge the best start possible.

Once the decisions have all been made, it will be time to start looking for the right plants. Where to start looking? Local nurseries are probably not your best option. It could take days or weeks to trawl through them to find anything remotely like what you're looking for, assuming they can even offer the right quantity, size and quality. That could become a never-ending task.

Turning to the internet would seem like the obvious thing to do, but Google 'Mature hedging' and

you are faced with the opposite problem. You will find dozens and dozens of websites all apparently offering the product you want, but the prices vary enormously. Also, how do you know what to expect in terms of quality and how do you go about sending back a lorry load of plants if they turn out to be the wrong size or type?

Current Distance Selling Regulations (2000) provide the buyer with a seven day cooling off period, which puts the onus on the supplier to get it right first time.

It would seem that this old fashioned industry is moving fast into the 21st Century and suppliers are embracing this to great effect.

The biggest bonus of internet competition is that quality is improving in order for suppliers to win more business. Discerning customers will always be after better quality plants and service. The competition is only ever a couple of clicks away.

There is no reason to accept anything other than top quality plants now and they are available at competitive prices. A mature box or yew hedge would have seemed like a major investment some years

ago, but they have become much more affordable and commonplace in recent years thanks to internet competition.

The internet is not the only way that this business is moving forward. The product itself is changing fast, in order to respond to the growing demand for 'instant results'. While one has always been

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able to buy box, yew and beech hedging etc in a range of sizes, it is now also available in a range of shapes too.

Growers are now innovating in order to satisfy demand for instant hedges, and they are using sophisticated technology to do this. Some even go as far as to plant their crops using unmanned robotic tractors, guided by GPS

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and cultivating plants in rows hundreds of metres long. Ongoing maintenance is carried out in the same fashion, by tractors crawling alongside the crop trimming and undercutting the plants automatically.

The person walking behind is there only to monitor the progress of the machine as it moves along. The results are spectacular too – hedges can now be supplied that are arrow straight, two metres tall and are literally the finished article.

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The days of lining out and spiralling thousands of bare root whips may be numbered as the customer increasingly wants a solution that won’t take years to achieve.

The best compromise would be to use the internet to find a supplier that will engage with you in a professional manner to find the best solution to suit your needs and will guarantee to deliver a fantastic end product whatever your budget.

