

HEDGEBOTE & HISTORY

Whether dead (interwoven poles or brushy cuttings) or live (living plants), hedges have been with us for a long time. A very long time.

Documentary evidence goes back to AD 800 (Anglo-Saxon times) while archaeological findings suggest hedges were in use in Roman Britain. In fact, the tools & techniques for hedging have even been found in the Neolithic period.

As well as marking boundaries & corralling animals they were also a valuable resource in their own right. In medieval times the legal right of commoners to gather fuel & winter feed for animals (“hedgebote”) was recognized. They also provided coppice timber, berries, nuts and were a haven for small game.

The earliest hedges were probably quite rough – little more than linear thickets, often on top of a bank. From the C16th the Enclosure movement greatly increased the planting of hedges – it’s estimated that 200 000 miles were added in the C18th & C19th alone. This peaked in the first half of the C19th. When farming slumped in the 1870’s little more was added.

By this time the patchwork of fields bordered by hedges which has typically come to represent the British landscape had been established. The overall amount of hedging remained stable from 1850 to 1950 although changes in land use (hedges are usually associated with stock raising) caused local fluctuations.

The increasing mechanization of farming after WWII, with ever larger machines, meant that small fields were more difficult, and hence more costly, to cultivate. As a result a huge amount of hedgerows were grubbed out. This trend has only recently slowed down, partly due to changes in governmental policy, partly as the economic “gains” have lessened & partly due to increased understanding of the more subtle benefits of hedgerows to farmers.

WHY LAY A HEDGE?

With time hedges, naturally, grow tall. The bottom, receiving less light, thins out. As hedges are traditionally used to corral sheep, cattle, horses etc this makes the hedge less effective as a barrier.

HOW DO YOU LAY A HEDGE?

An overgrown hedge consists of upright bushes or trees. Each main **stem** is partially cut just above the ground & this becomes a **pleacher**. The **pleacher** can then be bent over from the vertical & become more horizontal (or **laid**). Wooden **stakes** are put in at regular intervals.

The actual angle of the **pleacher** to the ground depends on the hedges purpose & local practice. The scrubby top growth may face only one side of the hedge (**single brushed**) or alternate **pleachers** may lay at different angles across the midline & so cause the top growth to be present on both sides of the hedge (**double brushed**). This again reflects the purpose of the hedge & local practice.

The tops of the **stakes** are often secured together by **binders**. These are usually hazel, willow, briars or clematis in 2.5–3m lengths. The **binders** are interwoven around the **stakes**, parallel with the ground, to strengthen the hedge initially.

WHAT THEN?

The **pleachers** of the **laid** hedge should still be alive. **Laying** will encourage strong new vertical shoots along the **pleacher**. After a season or two the hedge will be growing thickly from the base & once again be stock proof. Once **laid** it should be many years, usually decades, before it needs **laying** again.

WHY ARE HEDGES DIFFERENT?

There are marked regional differences in laid hedges. This partly reflects the function of the hedge (e.g. to act as a barrier to sheep or cattle?), & the local landscape (e.g. on a bank?).

In addition there is often a local “style” of hedging. These are usually referred to by geographical names (e.g. Somerset, Derbyshire) but there is considerable overlap & blending of styles. As a result, depending on the situation & the purpose of the hedge, it is quite possible to find, say, a Cumberland style hedge in Cheshire (although hedgers usually continue the local tradition).

Indeed, it is such a skilled craft that it used to be said that hedgers could tell who actually laid a hedge just by small differences in technique & style.

The most recent style is the Motorway – named as it is used along motorways! It has its own distinctive features, mostly related to simplicity, which reduce the time & cost of laying. It is, however, very unlikely that anyone would ever be able to tell who laid a particular stretch!



The uncut stem can be called a

- stem
- stick
- bush
- tree



Stakes are also called posts, poles or poles.

Usually 5'3" - 5'6"

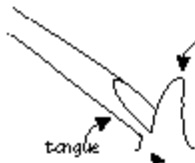
Hazel preferred, but ash or sweet chestnut also suitable.

Sawn square stakes also used



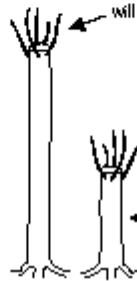
Stem partly cut is laid or layed. May be called a

- pleacher
- platcher
- plasher
- layer
- steeper
- ligger



The uncut piece is called the stub, head, lip or ear

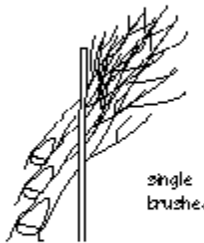
The base is called the stub, stool, stobbin, stobbing, stoving or stowel



Living stems kept to use as stakes in areas of high wind, or where stakes are unobtainable. Also called crops

half crop, cut to half hedge height

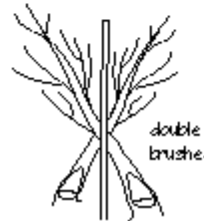
View along hedge



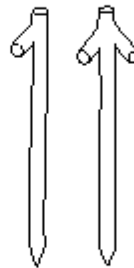
Hedges are either single brushed or double brushed

The brushwood can be called beaver

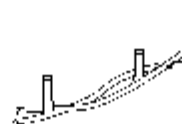
single brushed



double brushed



Crook or double crook, used to secure and support the hedge.



Binders, also known as ethers, heathers or withers. Process known as binding, ethering, heathering or winding. Various styles used