



# Healthy hedgerows on your land

Healthy hedges are an asset to farmers, support wildlife, and benefit the general public and the environment in numerous ways. The practical, step-by-step guidance provided here will help all who own or manage land to get their hedges back into top condition – no matter what state they find themselves in now – so they perform at their full environmental and ecological potential for years to come.

# Hedgerow management top tips

These simple management tips will help your hedgerow thrive. If your hedgerows are managed by contractors, please share this information with them and discuss how you want your hedgerows to be trimmed.

Some measures will save you time or money, others may cost more or require increased labour, but in the long term we think these measures will be good choices for you, and hugely positive for our native wildlife.


	Do	Don't
Lifecycle	<p>✓ Use the hedgerow management cycle to guide your management decisions and planning. All hedges will require rejuvenation (laying or coppicing) at some point, but with careful management, you can keep a hedge healthy for 40 or more years before you need to rejuvenate it. The hedge management cycle can be followed to provide wood-fuel which can generate income.</p>	<p>✗ Hedgerows cannot be kept at the same point of their lifecycle indefinitely without damaging their structure and threatening their future.</p>
Gaps	<p>✓ Plant up gaps in your hedgerow with locally suitable species. This is a good chance to increase the number of woody species, making it more robust, and better suited for wildlife.</p>	<p>✗ Gaps are often a sign that a change in hedge management is needed. They tend to get worse if the management approach isn't altered.</p>
Trees	<p>✓ Allow new young standard trees to grow; either select and protect suitable young trees, coppice a section and select a new stem from the regrowth, or plant a tree directly. Gaps in hedges are often a good opportunity to plant new hedgerow trees.</p>	<p>✗ Existing trees can be damaged or lost if hedge trimming is not done with care.</p>

**A hedgerow is a living system and needs flexible management**

**Gaps in hedges reduce their value both to us and to wildlife**

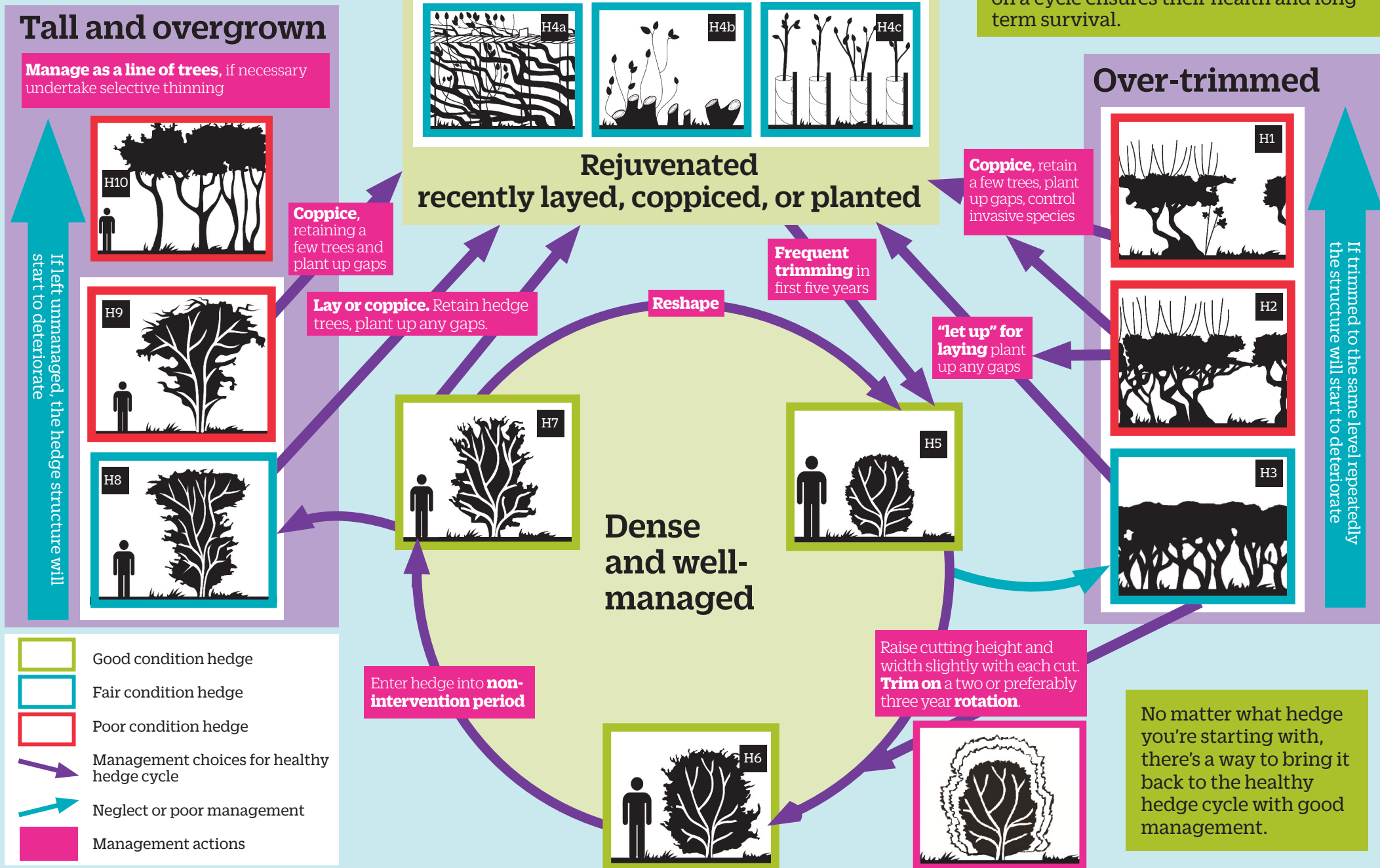
**Hedgerows provide a great opportunity to increase the number of trees without more land**

# Hedge cutting

	Do		Don't
When	<p>✓ Cut hedges as late in the cutting season as you can, ideally in late winter if and where conditions allow. This provides hedgerow fruit for wildlife over winter.</p>	<p><b>Wildlife relies on hedgerows for food in winter</b></p> <p><b>Blossom and fruit grow on second year wood on most hedgerow shrubs</b></p> <p><b>Cutting hedgerows at the same point indefinitely will damage their structure</b></p>	<p>✗ Cutting hedges in late summer/early autumn removes most of the fruit that could help prepare wildlife for winter. Avoid cutting hedges in bird breeding season.</p>
How often	<p>✓ Cut hedges every two or even three years. This allows the hedge to provide food for wildlife. Cutting each hedge every 3<sup>rd</sup> year can mean cutting only 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of your hedges in any one year, so cutting less frequently can also save you money</p>		<p>✗ Cutting hedges every year massively reduces the amount of food a hedge can provide for wildlife. It hastens the structural decline of your hedge which can be expensive to repair. You may have to structurally rejuvenate (lay or coppice) the hedge or plant up gaps more frequently.</p>
How	<p>✓ Raise cutting height and width slightly with each cut. Trim on a two or preferably three year rotation.</p>  <p>When they outgrow their space, they can be reshaped (or rejuvenated if they are losing cover at the base). Cutting in an 'A' shape improves the quality of the hedge habitat.</p>		<p>✗ Cutting hedges at the same level repeatedly causes scar tissue, forming a 'hard knuckle' at the trim line. Over time, cutting to the same height damages the structure of the hedge, which may lose vegetation at the base, and develop gaps as the shrubs struggle and die.</p>

# Hedgerow management cycle

Hedgerows are a dynamic system - it isn't possible to keep them at exactly the same point indefinitely. Managing them on a cycle ensures their health and long term survival.



# Key to Hedgerow Management cycle

## Over-trimmed



H1

### H1 Over-trimmed

- Heavily over-trimmed, hard knuckle at trim line
- Many gaps, sparse stems
- Bases may be gnarled or rotting
- Usually low and narrow
- May be invaded by elder, sycamore or other invasive species
- Lacks branches and foliage in the lower parts
- Closely and frequently flailed to the same line



H2

### H2 Over-trimmed

- Over-trimmed, hard knuckle at trim line
- Infrequent stems
- May be developing mushroom shaped growth
- Often low and narrow
- Closely and frequently flailed to the same line
- May lack branches and foliage in the lower parts
- Base canopy may or may not extend to the ground



H3

### H3 Over-trimmed

- Over-trimmed, hard knuckle may be starting to form
- Still has frequent healthy stems
- Base canopy may or may not extend to the ground

## Rejuvenated



H4a

### H4a Rejuvenated - recently laid

- Hedge stems cut at base and laid on their sides.
- Depending on time since being laid, significant regrowth may have grown from the base. The horizontal stems (alive or dead) should still be visible
- Approximately laid within the last five years



H4b

### H4b Rejuvenated - recently coppiced

- Stems all cut at ground level, stumps may be visible
- Significant regrowth may be visible from cut bases
- Approximately coppiced within the last five years



H4c

### H4c Rejuvenated - recently planted

- Approximately planted within the last five years
- Stems may still be protected by tree guards

## Dense and managed



H5

### H5 Dense and managed

- Healthy dense hedgerow
- Have obviously been trimmed in the fairly recent past. (may have shoots protruding but retains basic shape)
- Frequent healthy stems
- Dense amongst most of their length
- About 2m or more in height



H6

### H6 Dense and managed

- Healthy dense hedgerow not recently trimmed.
- May have 'straggly' appearance with protruding woody branches
- May be in a non-intervention stage of management
- May be on a longer trim rotation, e.g. three year cut
- About 3m or more in height



H7

### H7 Dense and managed

- May have a straggly appearance with numerous long woody branches protruding from the main body
- Usually still quite dense, but increasing volume may start to shade the lower branches
- Has frequent healthy stems, about 4m high.
- This is an unmanaged, overgrown version of H6

## Tall and overgrown



H8

### H8 Tall and overgrown

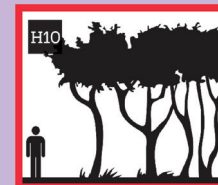
- Mature hedgerow, tall and leggy
- May have spreading tops
- Not been trimmed for many years
- Lacks significant foliage in the lower parts
- Stems still healthy, but may be infrequent and getting too large to lay



H9

### H9 Tall and overgrown

- Over-mature hedgerow, tall and leggy
- Spreading tops might be dying back
- Collapse possible
- No significant woody foliage in the lower parts
- May be developing gaps



H10

### H10 Tall and overgrown - line of trees

- Hedgerow has developed into a line of trees
- Very little, if any, woody undergrowth

---

## The Devon Difference



Although there are wide variations in the structure of hedges across the county, the true Devon hedge – in contrast to those in most other parts of Britain – has at its core a substantial earth bank faced with either stone or turf. Flower-rich or tussocky grass margins and sometimes ditches are an integral part of the best Devon hedges. The banks add greatly to the wildlife value of the hedge, as do the presence of mature trees with spreading crowns.

A Devon hedge is outstandingly beautiful when it has been carefully managed. This means taking hedges through a cycle of management so they stay healthy and vibrant. To prevent them from turning into lines of gappy trees

they need to be rejuvenated from time to time by steeping (laying) or coppicing and the banks kept in good shape. Careful trimming will help to keep them thick and bushy, while reducing overhead shade and preventing any input of fertilizers, muck or pesticides will keep the banks and margins full of flowers and tussocky grasses.

### Further reading and online resources

[www.hedgelinek.org.uk/resource/hedge-your-best](http://www.hedgelinek.org.uk/resource/hedge-your-best)

[www.hedgerowsurvey.ptes.org/reading-hedgerows](http://www.hedgerowsurvey.ptes.org/reading-hedgerows)

[www.hedgerowsurvey.ptes.org/creating-a-hedge-management-plan](http://www.hedgerowsurvey.ptes.org/creating-a-hedge-management-plan)

[www.devonhedges.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Interactive-Distinctive-Hedge-Map-Devon.pdf](http://www.devonhedges.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Interactive-Distinctive-Hedge-Map-Devon.pdf)

[www.devonhedges.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/9\\_Management1-turf-and-stone-facing.pdf](http://www.devonhedges.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/9_Management1-turf-and-stone-facing.pdf)

### Credits and acknowledgements

This leaflet was produced by South Hams Tree Warden Network from content kindly provided by People's Trust for Endangered Species ([www.ptes.org](http://www.ptes.org)). With grateful thanks to Megan Gimber and Zoe Roden at PTES; Rob Wolton at Devon Hedge Group ([www.devonhedges.org](http://www.devonhedges.org)) and Nigel Adams at Hedgelinek ([www.hedgelinek.org.uk](http://www.hedgelinek.org.uk)). SHTWN gratefully acknowledges the support of South Hams District Council.

Photography © 2025 Rob Wolton

Content © PTES 2025

people's  
trust for  
endangered  
species