

# Keep your hedge IN GOOD shape

Hedges define space in the garden, and make green, living boundaries for privacy. Low-maintenance, but not no-maintenance, they do need regular – if infrequent – care

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**H**edges are an excellent way to define the boundaries of a garden or to screen unwanted views and noise. Ornamental in their own right, they can be important structural features of a garden's overall design. They do, however, need managing and maintaining to look their best. While this need not be onerous, it does have to be planned and regular.

Established (and establishing) hedges need trimming to keep them dense and compact. The frequency, timing and degree of this varies with the style of hedge, its size and rate of growth. Various plant species are suited to different styles and sizes of hedge. Informal hedges usually need trimming just once a year, formal hedges two or three times as often.

## Formal hedges

Hedges grown to a formal outline need to be clipped regularly to maintain their shape. Trimming should ensure dense growth from the base to the top, and a neat outline. Formal hedges are often slightly tapered on both sides so that the base is wider than the top,

allowing light to reach the bottom of the hedge. This is known as cutting to a 'batter' and many gardeners recommend it, although for some vertical sides are preferred.

Most formal garden hedges are best trimmed in summer. For deciduous kinds, such as beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), once in late summer is usually sufficient but some, such as hawthorn (*Crataegus*), may need cutting twice – in summer and again in autumn. Popular broadleaved evergreen hedging, such as Portuguese laurel (*Prunus lusitanica*), is usually trimmed twice, while box (*Buxus sempervirens*), privet (*Ligustrum*) and *Lonicera nitida* are done two or three times a year. Once in late summer is usually sufficient for holly (*Ilex*).

Coniferous hedges, including Leyland cypress (x *Cuprocyparis leylandii*), yew (*Taxus baccata*), *Chamaecyparis* and *Thuja plicata*, are usually trimmed twice during the growing season, although Leyland cypress may even need three cuts. Try not to trim conifer hedges after August, as this can encourage brown patches and dieback. >>



## ▲ Keeping a small hedge

Low-growing hedges can be extremely useful in gardens – for formal parterres, border edging or more informal division of space. Privet (*Ligustrum*) is traditional and versatile, as is *Lonicera nitida*. Both are pruned two or three times during summer, as is box (*Buxus*). Smaller-growing shrubs such as lavender (*Lavandula*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus*) and *Osmanthus* are usually only trimmed once, after flowering. *Santolina* and *Potentilla fruticosa* are pruned in spring, then tidied after flowering. Small berberis are also good for hedging; trim deciduous *Berberis thunbergii* in summer and evergreen *B. darwinii* after flowering.

Smaller hedges and parterres do not need a 'batter' but look best with vertical sides. Using a guide of string, garden canes and a template (pictured above) helps ensure an even finish. Hand-held shears work well, but some gardeners favour topiary shears (see box, right).

**Powered hedgetrimmers (right) may be the best choice for compact, formal hedging: this rechargeable one makes short work of low box.**



## What tool should I use?

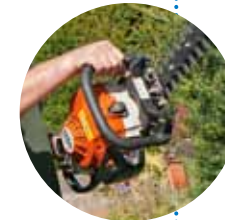
### Hand shears

Hand-held shears are fine for smaller hedges but, for long and tall stretches of hedges, powered hedgetrimmers make the job easier.



### Petrol trimmers

Petrol hedgetrimmers can be used anywhere but are usually heavier and more expensive than electric versions, and require more maintenance.



### Electric trimmers

The cables of mains electric hedgetrimmers limit where they can be used. Trimmers with battery packs (left) are more versatile but need recharging regularly.



### Topiary shears

Specialist shears are suitable for cutting soft stems such as box and lavender. Keep blades sharp and well lubricated to avoid rusting in storage.



### Secateurs

Use these on broad-leaved evergreens such as Portuguese laurel, as pruning these plants with shears causes cut surfaces to brown, spoiling their appearance.



## Trimming safely

Always think of safety when using a powered hedgetrimmer. Wear safety goggles and sturdy gloves. Before starting, remove any obstacles on the ground. Avoid using powered tools above shoulder height, and use sturdy, stable stepladders or platforms. Electric trimmers should be used with a residual current device (RCD) that cuts power if the cable is damaged. Do not use in damp conditions, and always lead the cable over your shoulder to prevent it being cut accidentally.



Informal hedges

Most formal hedges require regular pruning so flowers and fruit do not develop. For informal flowering and fruiting hedges, the timing of pruning is critical – pruning at the wrong time will remove most of the growth that would flower the following year. Helpfully, most flowering hedges are pruned in the same way as they would be if grown as ordinary shrubs.

For plants that flower on the current-season's growth, such as *Fuchsia magellanica* and *Rosa rugosa*, prune once, in spring. *Berberis*, *Escallonia* and lavender (*Lavandula*) should be pruned immediately after flowering, clipping back some of the new growth to keep them compact. In the case of shrubs that produce berries, such as *Cotoneaster* and *Pyracantha*, it is best to delay trimming until the berries appear, then lightly cut back longer shoots without removing too many of the berries.

Evergreens suitable for 'semi-formal' hedges, such as *Prunus lusitanica*, need only minimal pruning. Remove overlong or misplaced growths and do some gentle shaping of the outline to keep them within bounds. Cut individual shoots right back to where they originate within the hedge, to

disguise any pruning cuts.

Whenever working on garden hedges, check that there are no birds nesting – it is an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while it is either in use, or being built.

Plant choice and management

Choose the right plant for the size and type of hedge you want. Leyland cypress will quickly form a hedge but it needs careful trimming on a regular basis to contain its vigour and, like most conifers (yew is the exception), old wood on branches without live foliage is unlikely to produce new foliage. This makes rejuvenation a problem with most coniferous hedges (see box, p69). In an ideal world you should always trim conifers regularly, but lightly.

Informal hedges are ideal where space is not an issue, but in smaller gardens or where formal hedges are required it is possible to keep such hedges to 60cm (2ft) in width or less – if they are regularly trimmed. Informal hedges can be cut 'by eye' but maintaining the crisp lines of a formal hedge needs the aid of taut string (see box, below) or a template of timber or cardboard (see p66).

Most flowering hedges are pruned in the same way as if grown as shrubs'

Feeding of hedges is often overlooked, but to be at their best they require feeding each year in early spring with a general-purpose fertiliser. The bottom of the hedge should also be kept free of weeds and grass to ensure growth takes place at the base, and that the hedge is not competing for water and nutrients. Mulching after applying fertiliser will also help conserve moisture if the soil is moist.

It is worth taking the time to care for your hedges – without them your garden would look quite different. ●

[www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk) For more on choosing, planting and maintaining hedges, enter 'Hedges' in the search box on RHS Online.

❖ **Further reading:** see the new edition of *RHS Pruning and Training* by Chris Brickell & David Joyce, Dorling Kindersley, ISBN 9781405363129, RRP £19.99; **RHS price £17.99** RHS mail order: 0845 260 4505

Renovating hedges

Hedges can quickly become overgrown if not regularly trimmed, but some hedging plants respond well to hard, renovation pruning. These include deciduous beech, hawthorn and hornbeam, and evergreen broadleaves such as box, holly and privet. All can be reduced by as much as 50 percent in height and width in a single cut (but it is better to stagger hard pruning over two or more years).

Deciduous hedges are renovated in midwinter, when they are dormant; broadleaved evergreen hedges in mid-spring (they respond better to pruning when in active growth). In the first year cut back the width on one side only. Cut to at least 15cm (6in) less than the desired width, retaining any 'batter'. Trim the other side as normal but leave the top uncut. Mulch and feed in spring to encourage regrowth, and water weekly in dry spells. The following year, cut back the other side of the hedge but again leave the top, and continue to feed and water. In the third year, cut back the height to at least 15cm (6in) lower than the desired final height (below), more if the top is open and patchy.



Conifer hedge rejuvenation

Most conifer hedges, including *Cupressus*, *Chamaecyparis* and Leyland cypress, will not tolerate hard pruning. Yew (below) is an exception – it can be cut like a deciduous hedge, as it will bud back on old wood – but rejuvenation of other overgrown conifer hedges, rather than removal (which is a big job, perhaps best left to professionals) can be attempted.

In mid-spring, reduce the height by up to one third. Thin out side branches by removing some right back to the trunk, leaving others intact. This allows light and air into the plants, encouraging growth and branching of the remaining stems. Mulch and feed in spring, and keep well watered. The top of the hedge may remain bare for several seasons – so where holes or bare patches remain, allow shoots around the damaged area to grow out so that they can be tied or wired over the bare spots.



Yew hedge undergoing rejuvenation pruning at RHS Garden Wisley.



Same hedge less than one year later.

How to trim a formal evergreen hedge

Be guided by a formal hedge's growth rate – Leyland cypress may need three or four cuts a year, while yew and formal deciduous hedges one or two at most

1 Time to trim

By midsummer, new growth masks the crisp lines of a formal hedge (here at Barnsdale Gardens, Rutland), and has begun to exceed its boundaries.



1

Hedgecutting event at Rosemoor p91



2

2 Using guidelines

Cutting straight, crisp edges and a level top by eye can be difficult. Use a taut string between two posts as a guide; push canes into the ground, angled to give a 'batter' if necessary. Start at the bottom of the hedge to establish the width and work up.



3

3 Trimming with shears

When trimming a hedge by hand, keep the blades parallel to the line of the hedge to ensure surfaces are cut level and flat.

4 Using hedgetrimmers

With powered hedgetrimmers use a wide, sweeping action, working from the bottom of the hedge up, allowing the cut foliage to fall away. Avoid cutting too deeply into the hedge and damaging the outline. When cutting the top level, a taut, horizontal string tied between two posts is a useful guide to help keep the clipper's blades level.



4



5

5 Finishing off

Clear away cuttings, then water and mulch the hedge. If the top is to be shaped (into an arch or point, for example) you can use a template cut from plywood or cardboard. Place this on the hedge top and cut to its lines, moving it along as you proceed.