Bad bunnies and wicked weeds - protect your new hedge

In my experience there are two main reasons why hedgerows fail: rabbits and weeds! With regard to rabbits, the issue is to gauge whether or not they will cause a problem on your farm. On some farms, there is no problem and there is no need for rabbit fencing.

However, where they do graze the young hedgerow, it is unlikely to survive without protection. The difference between permanent rabbit fencing required for other crops is that hedgerows only require protection for a short period while getting established.

In my experience, most problems occur with early sown hedgerows during the hungry period for rabbits and hares in January whilst the hedgerow plants are not actively growing to get ahead of the grazing pressure.

Farmers in Reps must plant by the end of December, while farmers who joined AROS in 2011 can delay planting until spring. If delaying planting, make sure you have plants ordered now and make sure planting is done while the plants are still dormant.

So while the deadline for AROS farmers is the end of March 2012, the optimum time will depend on weather conditions.

Permanent fencing against rabbits involves rabbit wire and burying it beneath the ground or a wire mesh to prevent rabbits burrowing a tunnel beneath the wire. A few rows of electric fence and the electrical grid will have the same effect.

As vegetation grows, it will need to be cut to prevent the wire earthing, but hopefully the hedgerow will grow quickly passing the vulnerable stage.

Where a wide strip of plastic is used for weed control, I have seen the electric fence placed on the plastic.

I also find the hedgerow plants that are pruned to create a dense base pass the vulnerable stage quicker with the production of multiple stems rather than one single stem.

There are numerous suggestions on substances that can be applied on the plants that will discourage rabbits eating them, including stockholm tar and proprietary rabbit deterrent materials. They are useful in the armoury against rabbits, but require regular replacement.

The most important point is to keep an eye on your newly planted hedgerow and act if necessary. In previous years, many reports of hedgerow destruction occurred where the hedgerow was not seen for weeks after planting.

WEEDS

Competition from weeds causes problems on all farms. Where weeds are not controlled, the hedgerow will at best struggle on within the vegetation, taking years to establish and never have a dense base as it struggles up above the vegetation.

With the large lengths of hedgerow being planted under Reps and AROS, I have never seen effective manual weeding.

In the presence of large volumes of vegetation, there is huge competition for water, nutrients and also physical space at the base.

In my experience, many hedges are destroyed by competition for rain and other plants.

In previous years, there has been no weedkiller that will control the vegetation and not harm the hedgerow plants. Using weedkillers such as glyphosate in and around hedgerows requires huge care to prevent any drift onto the hedgerow.

Over the years, many farmers have told me of how they killed their new hedgerow inadvertently while spraying.

Plastic is the answer to weed control and encourages hedgerow growth in many ways. I like to use four foot strips of old used slage plastic. Ideally open up the slage plastic indoors for a time beforehand to reduce the smell. The wider the strip the better, due to the need for strimming and cutting of vegetation along the sides.

Further than restrict moisture, which is the most commonly asked question. I find the ground beneath the plastic retains moisture.

Whitehorn plants are pruned with a hand hedge trimmer to 100mm or 4 inches above ground level. Cut at an angle to facilitate the sharp stump being pushed through the plastic. Where farmers have seen the result of using plastic and pruning, no one has ever seen it being effective. The wider the strip the better, due to the need for strimming and cutting of vegetation along the sides.

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