

# Why hedges are good



Most farmers take their responsibility as custodians of the landscape seriously and take great pride in the appearance of their farms. This sense of responsibility is integral to the advancement of Ireland's green image and how our agricultural industry is perceived globally

**Deirdre Walsh**  
Teagasc College at the  
National Botanic Gardens

Unlike native ancient forests, many hedgerows are a comparatively recent component (centuries rather than millennia) in the landscape. In England, hedges and fencing introduced during enclosures from the 1600s onwards were controversial as rural labourers lost access to commonage where they could graze some cattle or sheep. Partly due to this, millions of these labourers were forced to emigrate, greatly reducing the rural population there.

On the other hand, economists questioned: "Why are the cattle on a common so puny and stunted? Why is the common itself so bareworn and cropped so differently from the adjoining enclosures?" said William F Lloyd in *Two Lectures in the Checks to Population*, Oxford University Press, 1833 (published in *The Land: an occasional magazine about land rights*). His argument was that commonage did not encourage the best farming.

Today, we are in favour of hedges for very valid environmental reasons.

Increasing concern over the environmental impacts of agriculture in Europe has led to the introduction of agri-environment schemes – GLAS being one example.

GLAS targets areas of immediate concern such as the protection of wildlife, preservation of the traditional landscape, and traditional species.

“ Planting native trees is recommended and specifically included in GLAS scheme requirements

There are several requirements to follow under the GLAS scheme when considering hedge planting. These are as follows:

- 1) A continuous length of at least 10m of new hedgerow.
- 2) Planting distance: six plants per metre in a double row.
- 3) Plants must be any of the following varieties:
  - Whitethorn: *Crataegus monogyna*.
  - Blackthorn: *Prunus spinosa*.
  - Holly: *Ilex aquifolium*, or any mix of these.

4) Maintained as required and kept clean of competing vegetation.

Adding trees in the establishment of hedgerow also delivers many benefits. Not only will they provide shelter for livestock, screening of farmyard buildings but also play a significant role in improving local landscape quality.

For the best ecological value to the farm, planting native trees is recommended and specifically included in GLAS scheme requirements.

There are native trees to suit the majority of soil conditions, for example plant alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), willow (*Salix alba*) or mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*) for wet soils and bird cherry (*Prunus padus*) and wild cherry (*Prunus avium*) for free draining fertile soils.

Overall, the prioritisation of hedgerow and tree planting delivers numerous benefits environmentally, ecologically and economically. There is no doubt that significant environmental challenges lie ahead of us but as an industry we can continue to strive and ensure the conservation of our agricultural landscapes for future farming and non-farming generations.