



#TeamWilder Toolkit: Wildlife Actions – Growing Shelter

One of the best things you can do in your garden or green space is to provide shelter for a variety of species. Shelter is vital for insects, birds, small mammals, amphibians and much more! This toolkit focuses on how you can grow shelter to support wildlife.

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Image credit: Andy Gibson

1. Vertical gardens

Gardening doesn't need to be restricted to the ground! Vertical surfaces like walls, fences, sheds, and garages can be converted into green, wildlife friendly areas too.

Climbing plants like ivy, wisteria, honeysuckle, and clematis will scale up vertical surfaces, covering otherwise bare areas with lush green foliage and colourful flowers. These vertical gardens will offer wildlife in your outside space extra feeding opportunities and areas to shelter.

Climbing plants can be grown in pots and trailed up walls using a trellis, making them a perfect addition for yards or balconies where space and access to soil is limited.

Vertical garden essentials:

- To give your vertical garden the structure it needs to grow, you'll want to add a trellis or wire to your chosen surface.
- Tie your climbing plants to your trellis and or wires. This will encourage them to grow in the right direction.
- Regularly check your ties to make sure that they're not cutting into the plant as it grows.
- Regularly prune your climbing plants to help them maintain shape and stop them from encroaching on other surfaces.



Recommended climbing plants:

Plant	Description	When it flowers
Ivy	Ivy is one of our most familiar plants, seen climbing up trees, walls, and along the ground, almost anywhere. It is a great provider of food and shelter for all kinds of animals, from butterflies to bats.	September to November
Honeysuckle	A true wildlife 'hotel', Honeysuckle is a climbing plant that caters for all kinds of wildlife: it provides nectar for insects, prey for bats, nest sites for birds and food for small mammals.	February to November
Clematis	Clematis, otherwise known as traveller's-joy is a climbing plant that scrabbles over bushes in hedgerows, woodland rides and edges, and scrubby grassland on limestone soils.	July to December

2. Heavenly hedgerows

Hedgerows are one of the most important garden habitats for wildlife and, with the right management; they will support a good variety of birds, small mammals, insects, and plants. As well as being vital refuges for native species, hedgerows are key to transforming our urban and suburban outdoor spaces into wildlife corridors, allowing animals to travel between dwindling habitats.

These 'green corridors', allow wildlife to move about between gardens and other spaces to reach feeding and breeding opportunities - this makes them a much more wildlife-friendly choice of boundary than fences or walls, especially if they're made up of native trees and shrubs.

To avoid disturbing wildlife, try to avoid cutting the entire hedge at once and do not cut at all during the bird-nesting season that spans March to July. Disturbing nesting birds is illegal. In the same way, don't 'tidy' trees and hedges unnecessarily and leave dead branches on the tree or where they have fallen if possible.

Living hedgerows make a vital contribution to halting biodiversity decline and tackling climate change - we would recommend that any garden large enough to accommodate one should have a hedge!

As well as offering food for insects, small mammals, and birds (see our [#TeamWilder Toolkit: Wildlife Actions – Food](#)), hedges provide important shelter and protection for many species - particularly nesting birds and hibernating insects.

Hedges make natural windbreaks, creating sheltered areas, which is particularly important for butterflies. They also create areas of shade, increasing the range of wildlife habitats in our gardens - as well as creating pleasant places for us to sit and rest. In terms of their benefit to the wider environment, they also soak up carbon, contribute to reduce rainwater run-off and flood risk, and filter dust and pollution from nearby streets – overall, as a garden feature, it's fair to say hedges are pretty hard to beat!



Informal hedges and trees are more natural and much better for wildlife than those that are regularly clipped, as they will create a denser, richer creature habitat and highway if allowed to thicken out and produce flowers and berries.

Allowing leaf litter to lay naturally at the base of your hedge also creates a good hideout for small mammals, hedgehogs hunting for worms and beetles, and ground-nesting bees.

Choosing your plants:

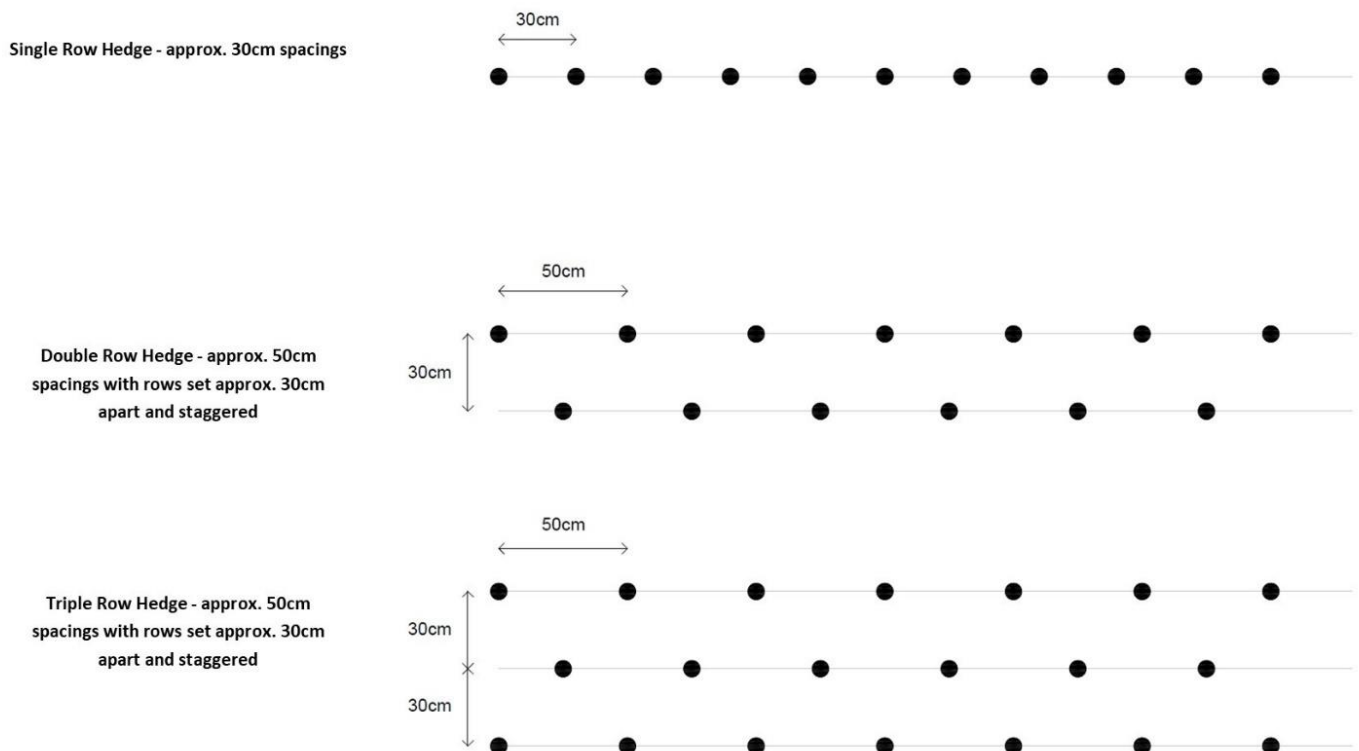
Native shrubs and trees like hawthorn, field maple, blackthorn, beech, hornbeam, and holly make an ideal mixture of hedging plants.

Growing rambling plants, such as wild rose, bramble and honeysuckle through your hedge will offer even more shelter (and food) for wildlife. Ivy is particularly beneficial in providing cover for nesting birds - and it flowers in the autumn when few other nectar sources are available to insects.

Planting your hedges:

The best time for planting is between November and March but be careful to avoid planting into waterlogged or frozen ground. Bare rooted plants are usually cheaper and more environmentally friendly (remember to buy from a peat-free nursery) but take care not to expose the roots for long when planting. Until they are established, we recommend keeping the base of your hedge plants free from weeds with a thick layer of garden mulch.

For a mixed native hedge, try to include three plants of the same species per 1m (3 ¼ ft). How you space your hedge will depend on how thick you want it to be when it is mature. We suggest the spacings below as a guide:



Maintaining your hedges:

Hedges are best left to do their own thing throughout most of the year, with pruning recommended in late winter or early spring - this ensures that nesting birds are not disturbed (hedges definitely need to be left well alone March to August for this reason!) - and that wildlife can take advantage of the pollen and nectar provided during the summer, and the fruits on offer during the winter months.

Top tips!

- Angling your plants at around 45 degrees as you plant them will help you to establish a hedge which is not too thin at the bottom.
- In the first spring after planting, cut your shrubs back to 45-60 cm (18-25 in) above the ground to encourages bushy growth in following years.
- Try to cut sections of hedge at different times, so there is always an undisturbed place for wildlife.

Suggested hedge plants:

- **Blackthorn** - *Prunus spinosa*
- **Bramble** - *Rubus fruticosus*
- **Common Beech** - *Fagus sylvatica*
- **Common Hawthorn** - *Crataegus monogyna*
- **Common Hornbeam** - *Carpinus betulus*
- **Crab Apple** - *Malus sylvestris*
- **Dog-rose** - *Rosa canina*
- **Field Maple** - *Acer campestre*
- **Guelder Rose** - *Viburnum opulus*
- **Hazel** - *Corylus avellana*
- **Holly** - *Ilex aquifolium*
- **Honeysuckle** - *Lonicera periclymenum*
- **Ivy** - *Hedera helix*
- **Traveller's-joy** (aka Old Man's Beard) - *Clematis vitalba*
- **Wayfaring tree** - *Viburnum lantana*

Schools & Community Groups:

If you are interested in creating new hedgerows on your site, there are various schemes which provide free trees and supporting resources – contact us at team.wilder@ywt.org.uk for more info!

3. Terrific trees

Old trees can also be a haven for wildlife, with hollow trunks providing a vital sheltered and stable environment for many species of fungi, moss, and lichen, as well as birds and bats.



Planting a tree: a step by step guide.

Step 1: Submerge the roots of your tree in a bucket of water for 2 hours before planting. This will prevent exposed roots from drying out and becoming damaged.

Step 2: Dig a hole that is at least double the width of your tree's root ball. When digging your hole keep the topsoil in a separate pile and mix it with compost. Use a spade to break up the soil at the bottom of your hole.

If your tree is tall, spindly or in an area that is exposed to the wind, it may need a little extra support. Use a mallet to firmly hammer a meter-long stake into the ground next to your tree on the side that will be facing the wind.

Step 3: Place your tree in the centre of your hole and gently spread the roots. You should ensure that your hole is deep enough that when it's filled in, the soil lines up with the soil mark on your trees stem (this line shows where the stem ends, and the roots begin).

Step 4: Carefully spread your soil mix around the roots, gently shaking your tree to make sure the soil is in contact with the roots. Once you've buried your roots, compact the soil around the base of the tree. Water generously to help the soil settle around roots. Remember to tie your tree to your meter-long stake if you're using one.

Step 5: Keep an eye on your tree as it grows! The first few weeks and years of your tree's life are especially important. Water it daily for the first two weeks, then weekly for the first year until it loses its leaves in autumn.

Regularly check the soil at the base of your tree is firm, so it doesn't fall over and remove any shoots growing from the roots. Remember to loosen tethers as your tree grows, readjusting as necessary to stop ties from biting into the stem. The stake can be removed after 3 years.

4. Woodland Edges

Wildlife loves life on the edge...if it's a woodland edge! Few of us can contemplate having a forest in our back gardens, but just a small area of woodland edge is enough to support a diverse range of plants...and where there are more diverse plants, there is more diverse wildlife!

A few metres of woodland can be enough to establish the sort of dynamic habitat that will encourage birds and butterflies to stop by, mice and hedgehogs to forage among the leaf litter, and frogs and toads to hibernate over winter.

Planning your woodland edge garden.

The most important feature of a woodland edge is that it is made up of different layers – the more layers, the more species will come flocking. Ideally, the height should increase from front to back to allow as much light in as possible:

- **Trees are the backbone of any woodland planting.** If you have room, oak tops the charts in terms of the number of different creatures it supports: 284 insect species alone! If space doesn't allow for mighty oaks, then smaller trees like rowan, holly, crab apple and hawthorn will also provide shelter for small animals and birds, as well as berries for food.



- **Shrubs should make up the layer beneath the tree canopy.** Among those providing good shelter and food for wildlife are brambles, pyracantha, and dogroses.
- **Herbaceous plants and bulbs at the base of the woodland edge attract bees, butterflies, and other insects,** and provide ground cover for smaller animals - native bluebells, primroses, wood avens, wood sorrel, foxgloves, stitchwort, lesser celandine, campions, and wild garlic are just a few suggestions for species that will provide cover and colour in this layer.

Establishing your woodland edge garden.

There are several things you can do to encourage wildlife into your woodland edge and to establish the planting:

- **Plant trees first** and keep the soil around them clear while they establish.
- **Later, add the shrubs, bulbs and herbaceous plants** that enjoy dappled shade underneath and between the trees. Leave room for these to grow but include some overlap to give continuous cover for creatures.
- Once the upper layer is strong & tall, **grow some climbers** into the branches. Ivy and honeysuckle are really good for wildlife - and contrary to malicious rumour, ivy doesn't strangle trees!
- **Put up some homes for wildlife.** It will be a long time before trees develop natural cavities that allow nesting, so why not put up some nest boxes in the meantime? A range of box sizes and entry holes could encourage tits, robins, flycatchers, other birds to nest. Maybe you could even put up an owl box if you have breeding owls close to home? Solitary bees will make use of bundles of hollow plant stems. Bats will use bat boxes made of un-planed, preservative-free wood attached to tree trunks.
- Stack fallen or **dead wood** in piles to provide a cosy home for small mammals, amphibians, insects, and beetles. **Leaf litter** is also habitat for beetles, worms, and slugs – which in turn provides fine dining for birds and hedgehogs!



Maintaining your woodland edge garden.

- **Don't be too tidy** - the decaying plant materials, leaf litter and rotting wood provide food sources and habitats for thousands of different kinds of organisms. Where possible, leave standing dead wood as habitat for insects and birds, and only cut down dead trees if they are dangerous.
- **Keep brambles and other 'bullies' in check** – while it's good to leave everything to its own devices up to a point, you may need to take out some of the more menacing stems of dog rose, pyracantha and bramble to prevent them completely taking over.
- **Have a go at coppicing** - a traditional woodland practice, this involves cutting back all the stems of species like elder, hazel, birch, and oak to just above the ground. This encourages healthy new growth & prevents the canopy becoming too thick, allowing in some light to enable wildflowers to thrive. Coppicing only needs to be done every few years – it's good to do it in rotation, so that different areas of the woodland are cut in different years.



- **Use mulch** - it is helpful to mulch around plant bases when they are establishing; a layer of leaf litter, grass clippings or other organic matter will maximise soil moisture retention.

Top tips!

- Establish which trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants and bulbs are most suitable by looking at what is growing in woods near to your home.
- Plant broad-leaved native tree species, as they will support more biodiversity than conifers and introduced species.
- When planting trees, be conscious that tree roots spread horizontally, so keep them away from buildings and other areas they might affect like ponds and streams.
- Collect fallen leaves in autumn to make leaf mould – making a simple bay from pallets or wire mesh somewhere in a corner is a great way to store your leaves. A year later, you will have a lovely supply of mulch!

Suggested plants

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alder <i>Alnus glutinosa</i> • Bramble <i>Rubus fruticosus</i> • Bugle <i>Ajuga reptans</i> • Common Hawthorn <i>Crataegus monogyna</i> • Crab Apple <i>Malus sylvestris</i> • Dog-rose <i>Rosa canina</i> • Elder <i>Sambucus nigra</i> • English Bluebell <i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i> • English Oak <i>Quercus robur</i> • Foxglove <i>Digitalis purpurea</i> • Hazel <i>Corylus avellana</i> • Holly <i>Ilex aquifolium</i> • Honeysuckle <i>Lonicera periclymenum</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ivy <i>Hedera helix</i> • Lesser Celandine • Lesser stitchwort • Ox-eye Daisy <i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i> • Primrose <i>Primula vulgaris</i> • Red Campion <i>Silene dioica</i> • Rowan <i>Sorbus aucuparia</i> • Silver Birch <i>Betula pendula</i> • Snowdrop <i>Galanthus nivalis</i> • Stinking Hellebore <i>Helleborus foetidus</i> • Wild Garlic • Wood Anemone <i>Anemone nemorosa</i> • Wood Avens • Wood Betony <i>Stachys officinalis</i> • Wood sorrel |
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5. Creating a 'tangle'

A tangle is just a wild corner where brambles, nettles, thistles, and dock have been left to thrive, providing shelter and food for a range of insects, birds, and small mammals. Many species of butterflies rely on brambles and nettles to lay their eggs and for their caterpillars to thrive, so make sure you leave at least one corner of your garden to grow a little bit wild!

Bugs and insects will also hibernate in dead stalks and among fallen leaves – so leave those as long as possible before tidying your garden or green space. **Wildlife loves a messy garden!**

This toolkit has been created with credit to The Wildlife Trusts.

