



1 HIGH AND MIGHTY

A fine example of pleaching (interleaving branches) or, in simple terms, a hedge on a stick. These are limes, but the technique also works well with crab apples, hornbeams, beech and *Quercus ilex*. Hedges like these require a bit of help at the beginning, and annual pruning thereafter, but they are invaluable where you need a higher boundary.

1 ROBERT MABIC / GAP PHOTOS; DESIGN: DINA DEFERRE

HEDGES

Domestic hedges are more than just dividing lines; they can be ornamental in their own right. James Alexander-Sinclair considers the options, depending on your taste and situation

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR

Where would our gardens be without hedges? They are our boundaries, our walls, our dividing screens, our guardians, our supports and our skeletons. In spring they burst into fresh clean growth, in summer they shelter nesting birds and provide a solid background for our borders, and in winter they carry the snow and give architecture to our frosted gardens. To answer my own question, therefore, we would be up the creek and in the soup.

The history of the hedge is one of protection rather than ornamentation, beginning when man evolved enough to keep animals. It was generally considered a bad idea to have your sheep/goats/cattle/horses/children wandering off unchallenged, so the field boundary hedge was invented. Initially, it was formed from thorny branches cut from nearby trees, but in time this evolved into a living hedge that could be laid to make a barrier through which even the most devious sheep could not escape. This idea was eventually extended from the field to the domestic garden. I have done a little survey of the hedges I have seen in various gardens over the past few weeks, and there are many different types. To make things simpler, I have divided them up into various categories.

First, the agricultural hedge: this includes hawthorn, blackthorn, wild rose, dogwoods and such like. These make for a beefy hedge that's fine for a field edge or large space, but a bad idea in a small garden. Field hedges are normally 60 per cent hawthorn and 40 per cent other species, but if you reverse the proportions and include more decorative plants among the thorn, it makes for a much prettier variation. You could also add some raspberries or a couple of climbers to make it even more exciting, but it will still be unsuitable for a smaller garden.

In the white tie and tails category are the formal hedges and, of these, the very best is yew (*Taxus baccata*), a rich, dark green that is relatively simple to clip and a fabulous foil to pretty much any plant of any colour. People worry that it is very slow growing, but, to be frank, this is tosh as it will have presence and heft within five or six years. Box, once ubiquitous, has fallen out of favour since the appearance of box blight and box caterpillar, and none of the alternatives is quite as good – it's like being fobbed off with Angel Delight when what you really wanted was a fine crème brûlée. Beech is another good one – or hornbeam if your ground is wet over winter. Privet, the suburban stalwart, also scrubs up well, and its flowers smell great. Its problem is one of over-eagerness in that it grows all the time and needs about three or four cuts a year. Oh, and holly – don't forget the holly.



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Next is the repent at leisure hedge, notably the Leyland cypress, which has been planted in countless gardens by well-intentioned people whose only wish is to block out the neighbours. They are innocents in a world of horticultural depravity, because before long their cute little hedge is a towering, soil-sucking monster – almost never a good idea. Laurel is fine provided it has enough space to sprawl: if it doesn't (and I speak from experience), you have a lot of chopping ahead of you.

Finally, the wildcards: shrubs that don't mind having hedginess (or hedgemony) thrust upon them. Many roses (especially the rugosas) make excellent hedges. *Viburnum tinus* is also good, and bamboos if you want something upright and rustly. I made an excellent hedge out of *Miscanthus*, which swoops and waves in the breeze, although it's pretty ineffectual in the winter. *Osmanthus* is evergreen and scented,

Berberis is colourful and usefully spiny, and both *Escallonia* and *Griselinia* are effective in coastal gardens. *Photinia* is all right if you like ugly plants, lavender good if you need something low and scented – although in that situation I would always plump for rosemary, as it is less of a cliché.

No matter what your personal taste or size of garden, everybody's life is happier with a hedge. Apart from anything else, hedge clipping is one of the best jobs there is – it combines patience, precision, very sharp tools and healthy exercise. The effect is pretty immediate and my goodness it looks good. □

NEXT MONTH The humble parking space.

HEDGING EXAMPLES TO VISIT

Not many people visit gardens just to look at hedges, but it can be worth checking out the opposition. For eccentricity, there's **Rockingham Castle's** elephant hedge (rockinghamcastle.com), and for sheer scale you can't beat the monumental 14m-high yews at **Powis Castle** (nationaltrust.org.uk/powis-castle-and-garden). **Chatsworth House** has a magnificent serpentine beech hedge that weaves its way up the hill (chatsworth.org/garden). The Grade II-listed hedged gardens of **Hill Close, Warwick**, maintained by volunteers, show how merchants in the town used to live (hillclosegardens.com). All of the **RHS Gardens** have a good range of hedges. RHS Wisley even has a garden dedicated to alternatives to the blight-troubled box hedging (rhs.org.uk).

If you'd rather not leave the comfort of your own home, there's plenty of hedge-based reading to be found, including the following: *Hedge Britannia: A Curious History of a British Obsession* by Hugh Barker (Bloomsbury, 2013). *A Natural History of the Hedgerow: And Ditches, Dykes and Dry Stone Walls* by John Wright (Profile, 2017). *The Brambly Hedge Complete Collection* by Jill Barklem (Harper Collins, 2015) – not much to do with gardens, but nonetheless utterly charming.



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2 CHARLES HAWES / GAP PHOTOS; 3 LEE AWISON / GAP PHOTOS; 4 FHF GREENMEDIA / GAP PHOTOS



5 CHARLES HAWES / GAP PHOTOS

2 HEDGE ON THE OCEAN WAVES

Not all hedges have to be straight and rectangular: they can follow any direction you fancy. This one is at Le Jardin Plume in Normandy and looks like sharks chasing each other through a troubled sea. I think.

3 OUTDOOR WALL HANGING

This is a tapestry hedge, so called because it uses a mixture of green and copper beech planted together. It is very striking, but you need to choose your position carefully with this design as it doesn't really work in rural gardens and is distracting as a background to borders.

4 PLIANCY AND PRUNING

This is a doddle to grow – push a few willow cuttings into the ground and within a couple of years you will have a malleable hedge. You can grow screens, igloos, enclosures or whatever shape you like. Health warning: it will need frequent pruning or you will end up with a serious thicket.

5 A HEDGE FOR ALL OCCASIONS

Three hedges in one – informal *Rosa rugosa* in the foreground, formal battlemented yew behind, and finally some elegant pleached limes along the church boundary. The rose hedge is particularly good, as it is burglar-proof, flowery and has hips like a samba dancer.