

# New Irish record for hedge cutting

A new Irish Record for Hedge Cutters was set at the first Irish Hedge Cutting Championships.

The Championships were held at Kilbline Farm, Bennettsbridge, Co. Kilkenny on Sunday with eighty-four hedge cutters in attendance at the Kilkenny Tractor Machinery and Working Day hosted by Gowran Vintage Club.

The first Irish Hedge Cutting Champion is Peter Byrne from Castledermot. Reserve Champion is Lyndsey Lodge, Dunmore East, Co. Waterford. Catherine Keena, Teagasc who was a judge along with Mick Power of Coillte explains the judging criteria

## SAFE OPERATING PROCEDURES

"Unless you recognise the risk, machinery is dangerous and hedge cutting machinery is particularly dangerous.

There is a risk of serious injury or death from flying debris which can include nails or shreds of wire propelled by a hedge cutter. So it

is no surprise that safety was a very important aspect of the scoring. Safety issues identified in the Teagasc Proficiency Test on Mechanical Hedge Trimming were used in the compilation of the competition score sheet. Appropriate safety clothing such as boots and high visibility clothing was considered.

Every hedge cutting site should be assessed for risks before work commences. Engagement of the PTO should only occur when the hedge cutter is in place and ready to start work.

The PTO should be disengaged before the hedge cutter leaves the site and before stopping the engine. The flail should have stopped running before the driver leaves the tractor seat. The flail head should be returned to a safe position. The safe way to dismount from a tractor is backwards.

## ASSESSMENT OF THE TRIMMED HEDGEROW

A clean cut with no shattered stems is required. Sharp flails are necessary to achieve this.

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Helping to fence the rabbits out! Helping with the job of planting and fencing a new hedge on the farm of Michael Norris at Kilbally, Quilty, Co Waterford were Niall Greene, Richard Skehan and Eilish Norris, Rathgormack, Co. Waterford. Strands of electric fencing were erected to deter rabbits. The new plants will be pruned later in spring while still dormant, and plastic will be laid for weed control.

It is also difficult to trim growth of more than three years growth with a flail. The competition hedgerow had one year's growth.

Farmers in agri-environment schemes are now generally advised to trim on a three year cycle. Hedge cutting operators like to trim hedgerows every year. Regular trimming does not allow flowers or fruit to develop. Hence it is most important that within our regularly trimmed hedgerows, occasional whitethorn saplings are allowed to grow, perhaps one or two in each field side.

When I enquired why no saplings were left, some answered there was nothing 'suitable' to leave. There is a greater awareness of leaving trees such as ash, thanks to REPS. As of now, I find few think of retaining a whitethorn sapling. The most important source of honey in Ireland is whitethorn flowers. And bees are incredibly important for the pollination of our crops. So it is important that every hedgerow contributes by leaving a new sapling in every routinely trimmed hedgerow.

Individual whitethorn trees provide flowers for insects, haws for birds and are a very important of the Irish landscape which is a major attraction to visiting tourists.

## SLOPING SIDES

The nature of whitethorn is

that it grows into a mature tree with a canopy. Hedgerows are an artificial creation — trimming keeps vegetative growth at the base.

To encourage vegetative growth at the base, light is required. To prevent self-shading, it is recommended to side trim to a triangular profile, sloping both sides from a wider base to the peak. Like most Irish hedgerows, the hedgerows in Kilbline Farm had been pollarded (topped at around 1.5 m or 5') at some stage in the past.

Growth on whitethorn occurs just below the cut, so pollarding has the effect of pulling all the growth to this level with no vegetative growth at ground level.

It is not possible to slope the sides from a wide base in such hedgerows as the base is narrow and stemmy with no vegetative growth.

It is my view that such hedgerow need to be coppiced or cut at ground level with a circular saw. Resultant regrowth should be trimmed to a triangular profile, allowing light to the base on both sides.

Approximately 4,500 farmers have coppiced over 1,500 km of hedgerows under recent agri-environment schemes.

## GENERAL APPEARANCE

Understandably hedge cutting operators take great

pride in their work. A compliment on a well trimmed hedgerow is that a level could be placed on it!

While straightness, neatness and general appearance is important, a very low straight back and sides is not a wildlife friendly hedge. Farmers now receive payments for their hedgerows under agri-environment schemes and Single Farm Payment because of their importance as landscape features.

Under Cross Compliance for Single Payment, farmers are now asked if birds or birds nests are deliberately being disturbed during the

nesting season. The bird nesting season begins on 1 March. So hedge cutting operators will be busy in the next six weeks. Hopefully those who took part in the first Irish Hedge Cutting Championships and the many others who attended will remember the safety and environmental messages.

The Hedge Cutting Championships may prove to be a most effective way to promote positive hedgerow management for the benefit of farmers, hedge cutter operators, wildlife and the Irish countryside.

Well done to Gowran Vintage Club for their initiative."

## First Irish Hedge Cutting Championships Score Sheet

	Maximum Score
<b>Safe Operating Procedures</b>	
Wearing PPE	5
Checking site for hazards	5
Location of engagement of PTO	5
Location of disengagement of PTO	5
Disengage PTO before stopping engine	5
Flail stopped running before leaving tractor	5
Dismounting correctly	5
<b>Assessment of Trimmed Hedgerow</b>	
Clean cut with no shattered stems	15
Slope on hedgerow	10
Sapling retained	10
Straightness	10
Neatness	10
General Appearance	10
Total for Hedge Cutting Operation	100
Skills Test 1	50
Skills Test 2	50
Overall Score	200

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