

ENVIRONMENT

October 2023

ACRES dates for your diary

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October to December:

- geese and swans grassland: must have an average sward height between 5 and 12cm by October 1 – remove mown material, and no grazing or machinery operations from October 1 to March 31;
- management of intensive grassland next to a watercourse: no grazing from October 1 to March 15;
- grass margins: no grazing or cutting in year 1;
- riparian buffer strips/zones in grassland: can be cut between September and February with offtakes removed;
- over winter stubble: no grazing or topping from harvest to February 1;
- brassica fodder stubble: must be grazed after October 15 and must not cause poaching or soil erosion – after grazing, must leave undisturbed until March;
- catch crops: must remain *in situ* from date of sowing to January 1;
- rare breeds: ensure you meet the minimum average of 0.1 livestock unit (LU) for 2023 by December 31; and,
- hedges: in Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme (ACRES) area-based actions, hedges less than 1.8m should not be cut. Now is the time to plan the establishment of your hedge under ACRES. Although hedge plants aren't available until the first frost and planting is normally after January, now is the time to prepare – see pages 2 and 3.

Expression of interest to apply for ACRES tranche 2

Tranche 2 of ACRES is expected to open in mid October. If you wish to express your interest in applying for the Scheme, please contact your local Teagasc office.

Planting a topped hedge or treeline hedge?



At planting decide if your new hedge will be a topped hedge or a treeline hedge – both types are good. A diversity of hedges is desirable.

Approximately 5,000 farmers will plant 2,000km of new hedges under ACRES this winter. The first decision is whether you want a topped hedge or a treeline hedge. Both are good for biodiversity and both should be present on farms, but management at establishment differs.

Topped hedges are maintained to form a traditional hedge with a dense base, while treeline hedges/escaped hedges are untopped hedges, forming a treeline or linear woodland. For ACRES, plants must be of Irish origin or provenance and must be purchased from registered producers. Irish provenance is important as such plants are more accustomed to Irish growing conditions. Seven hedge species are allowed in ACRES: whitethorn; blackthorn; holly; hazel; spindle; guelder rose; and, dog rose. However, because it is difficult

to obtain many of these in Irish provenance, ACRES now allows hedges of a single species. Whitethorn is the most likely. Five plants per metre must be planted in a double staggered row – about 40cm between plants in each row and similar between rows.

Turning over the soil with a digger makes it easier for planting. Start to dig at least 1m from the fence line. The real benefits of a hedge for carbon and biodiversity come from their width and density, so be prepared to have a 3m wide hedge in the future.

Buy two-year-old bare-rooted whips. During planting, don't let the whips dry out by keeping them in the bag. Plant to the same depth as previously planted – at the root collar. Don't bury the stem and don't expose the roots. Once in place, firm the soil around the plant with your boot.



Building the base for a topped hedge with pruning and compostable film.

Topped hedge

Once planted, identify and protect individual whitethorn plants with a tree guard – one every 10m – to allow them to grow into individual trees above the body of the hedge and in future will provide flowers for bees and haws for birds and mammals. With the exception of holly and the individual thorn trees protected by the tree guards, all plants should be cut off or pruned about 3cm above the ground. This cut should be sloping, leaving a sharp point. A strip of compostable film should be then pushed over the cut stems as a weed control barrier. The wider this is the better – at least 1.2m reduces the chance of vegetation growing alongside from flopping over the hedge. In early July walk down this vegetation.

Whitethorn wants to grow into a tree with a single stem and a canopy – just like an oak tree. In order to have a topped hedge, this apical dominance must be managed. Pruning is necessary to create a thick, dense hedge at the base as each individual plant will tiller and



Treeline hedge not pruned and never to be topped.

create numerous shoots from below the cutting point, so instead of one stem it will produce multiple shoots.

Additional pruning will be required for a few years after the hedge has been planted, and whenever the flail can be used it is important to continue the incremental cutting, just above the previous cut and shape the hedge into a triangular or A-shaped profile. This allows light to the base encouraging dense growth. After a few years, the wire fence can be removed.

Treeline hedge

For a treeline hedge or escaped hedge, the planting procedure is the same as for a topped hedge, except no hedge plants are pruned but all are allowed grow into trees with full canopies. Because plants are not pruned, compostable film is not a practical method of weed control. Other mulches can be considered such as bark mulch or sheep's wool. Walking down the vegetation around the plants during the summer may be sufficient to keep the vegetation away from the hedge plants.

Hedge cutting – leave a new thorn sapling



Thorn saplings retained in topped hedge.

Our network of native hedges in the Irish countryside (an estimated 689,000km) uses a very broad definition of hedge, including tall treeline hedges, stockproof hedges, gappy hedges and earth banks with occasional shrubs. When asked what is the best hedge – the answer is the hedge already on your farm. These are valuable, most likely to have remained undisturbed for 200 years, and contain shrubs and associated lichen, mosses and fungi, ground flora and soil full of biodiversity and stores of carbon.

Avoid harmful hedge management practices, such as:

- reducing the height of treeline hedges producing ‘upside down toilet brush hedges’;
- over-flailing topped hedges reducing the amount of vegetation, particularly on top of banks; and,
- pushing over hedges with a digger as an improper method of hedge laying.

Hedges should only be topped where there is a mass of dense growth at the base growing

actively in a triangular or A-shaped profile, with the peak allowed grow as tall as possible while still cutting the growing point to prevent escaping.

The biodiversity of treeline hedges is primarily in the canopy – full of flowers and fruit. Topped hedges with a dense base or laid hedges provide nest sites for birds with flowers and fruit on individual trees retained. A diversity of hedges including treeline hedges and topped hedges is desirable

When cutting your hedges this autumn, leave a new thorn sapling in every topped hedge. In practice this will be a small clump of thorn saplings. They need to be marked so that next year they can identified and retained. Within a few years they will provide flowers for bees and fruit for birds, which are not found on the body of a topped hedge.

For farmers in Nitrates Derogation, this is one hedge management option, but many mistakenly think they do not have a thorn tree, but it is easy to retain a whitethorn or blackthorn sapling. Contractors will do whatever you want – as long as they know. Have a conversation with your hedge-cutting contractors. Contractors take pride in their work and want to do a professional job. The challenge is to change the perception of a ‘well-kept’ topped hedge from neat level short back and sides to a taller wider more dense hedge containing thorn trees, which is better for biodiversity and for carbon. While bigger is better, diversity is desirable but only healthy hedges will deliver for biodiversity and carbon.