

ON TRIAL hedging review

native hedging suppliers on trial



In the second part of our hedging trial we tested native mixed hedging packs supplied by seven mail-order suppliers. Buying packs gave us an opportunity not just to test the quality of the plants sold, but also the variety of species supplied.

What we bought

From each supplier our anonymous shoppers bought several of their predetermined or recommended packs. While some suppliers will tell you exactly what species are included and in what proportions, others are more vague, providing a long list of species your pack may or may not include. What is made clear is that hawthorn and blackthorn will make up a large part of what is included.

What we got

As expected, around half of all the mixes were hawthorn and blackthorn plants. The remaining plants from all the suppliers were made up from 20 other species, all suitable for a native mixed hedge.

The suppliers varied in the number of species supplied in their mixes. For example, the packs supplied by Hopes Grove Nurseries included ten different species of plant, while those bought from YSJ Seeds and Buckingham Nurseries contained only four.

Responding to the increased drive to attract wildlife into gardens, many mail-order companies now offer mixed packs of native hedging plants, sold either by the metre or as a collection. With the pre-selected packs, the species they contain and the proportions of different species vary between suppliers.

Going native

Debbie Pain and Duncan McNiven planted their mixed native hedge just six years ago. Already, it has produced an impenetrable 1.8m-high hedge. Keen to attract as much wildlife into their garden as possible, they also wanted a thick hedge to separate their garden from the public footpath running alongside.

Instead of buying a pre-selected mixture of plants, they decided to choose plants individually from a specialist nursery. With a basic structure of hawthorn and blackthorn, they selected the rest from the long list on offer, choosing species which are especially good for wildlife.

'When the hedge was first planted, it looked just like small twigs sticking out of the ground,' recalls Debbie. But using a black plastic mulch, which helped to conserve moisture, and a regime of hard pruning for the first few years, it wasn't long before the hedge began to knit together.

And it wasn't long before the wildlife started to arrive either. Within a few years, the brimstone butterfly, which lays its eggs on buckthorn and alder-buckthorn, and the holly

blue butterfly both bred in their garden. Insects that feed on plants have attracted others that prey on them – parasitic wasps, ladybirds, bush crickets, dragonflies and damselflies. The general increase in insect populations acting as a food resource, as well as the shelter the hedge offers, has also increased the numbers of visiting birds. In fact over the past six years, Debbie and Duncan have recorded over 90 different species of bird either in or over their garden!

When and how to prune a native hedge is a matter of choice, but Duncan uses a regime of selective pruning. Cutting back the quickest growers, such as hawthorn and blackthorn, allows some of the slower growers, such as guelder rose and spindle, to flourish. He also leaves the fresh trimmings on the ground overnight to give bugs a chance to escape back into the hedge. Another good tip is to throw some of the autumn clippings into the base of the hedge – they not only provide extra food and shelter for wildlife, but also encourage a thicker hedge by promoting new seedlings to grow up through the existing plants.



Our native hedging trial grounds in August. We were generally impressed with the quality of native hedging packs

Pack sizes differ between the suppliers too. While many sell their packs in small multiples of around ten plants or less, BTCV and Crown Nursery only sell in multiples of 50. All suppliers do offer plants individually rather than in a pack, but some have a minimum order per species, so check before making your choice.

All but one of the suppliers give details on the size of plants to expect. Of these, five

specified the size of plants to be 60-90cm, while the plants sold by BTCV are slightly smaller, at 40-60cm. Ornamental Trees does not provide information on the size of their hedging plants – in the event, they measured between 37cm and 76cm.

Most of the plants we bought were supplied bare-rooted, although some, such as holly, arrived in pots. All the plants were ordered and treated in exactly the same way as the previous trial, being planted out into bare soil through a black plastic mulch.

Trial results

We were generally very pleased with the quality of plants we received in this trial. Most of the plants we bought survived their first season and all seven suppliers received a final plant condition rating of either acceptable or good.

Buying guide

Of the nurseries tested, we again pick **Hopes Grove Nurseries** as our Best Buy. The mix of plants they supplied was the most varied of the lot and all were of a good quality.

If you want to plant a hedge over 25m however, buy from **BTCV** instead. They had the fastest delivery time and their prices are very competitive.

Prices and minimum order sizes varied greatly between suppliers. Although BTCV sold the cheapest packs of plants, their postage seemed expensive and pack sizes could only be purchased in multiples of 50 plants. Despite this, if you are ordering a lot of plants, the lower price of the BTCV hedging plants may well be an important consideration.

Mixed native hedging packs offer cheap and generally good quality plants. If you don't mind too much what plants you get, or if you are confused by the multitude of different species on offer, buying a pre-determined mix may be the best option for you. If you feel like being a bit more adventurous, then you should select plants individually, choosing those species that you like and which will suit your garden setting (see Postcode Plant Database, p437).

contacts

BTCV Enterprises
Conservation Centre, Balby Road,
Doncaster DN4 0RH
☎01302 572200

Buckingham Nurseries
Tingewick Road,
Buckingham MK18 4AE
☎01280 813556 www.hedging.co.uk

Chew Valley Trees
Winford Road, Chew Magna, Bristol
BS40 8QE ☎01275 333752

Crown Nursery
High Street, Ufford, Woodbridge,
Suffolk IP13 6EL ☎01394 460755
(Cat: 2 x 1st class stamps)

Hopes Grove Nurseries
Smallhythe Road, Tenterden, Kent
TN30 7LT ☎01580 765600

Landford Trees
Landford Lodge, Landford,
Salisbury, Wiltshire SP5 2EH
☎01794 390808

Ornamental Tree Nurseries
Cobnash, Kingsland, Herefordshire
HR6 9QZ ☎01568 708016
(Cat: 2 x 2nd class stamps)

Weasdale Nurseries
Newbiggin on Lune, Kirkby Stephen,
Cumbria CA17 4LX ☎015396 23246
(Cat: £1.50 or 6 x 1st class stamps)

YSJ Seeds
Kingsfield Conservation Nursery,
Broadenham Lane, Winsham,
Chard, Somerset TA20 4JF
☎01460 30070
(Cat: 31p stamp)

Native hedging suppliers on trial

Supplier	Smallest mixed hedging pack size	Can you buy individual plants to make up your own mixture?	Minimum p&p	Delivery time (days)	Price of 50 plants	Number of plant species supplied [1]	% blackthorn	% hawthorn	% plants that died	% plants alive but poor or very poor	Plant quality [2]
Buckingham Nurseries	10 plants	Yes	£4.95	42-69	£34	4	20%	40%	3%	3%	☆
BTCV Enterprises	50 plants	Yes (minimum 25 of one species)	£17.63	13-26	£21.62	7	14%	29%	7%	5%	☆
Chew Valley Trees	1 metre (4 plants)	Yes	£1	15-48	£45.38	10	8%	46%	5%	10%	◇
Crown Nursery	50 plants	Yes	£8.50	13-34	£35	6	18%	36%	7%	5%	◇
Hopes Grove Nurseries	10 plants	Yes (minimum 5 of one species)	£4.95	27-35	£31	10	19%	48%	0%	0%	☆
Ornamental Tree Nurseries	None	Yes	£9.95	14-31	£22.31	8 [3]	24%	44%	2%	9%	◇
YSJ Seeds	10 plants	Yes	None	3-42	£47.82	4	0%	50%	3%	0%	◇

Key [1] A minimum of 40 plants was bought from each supplier [2] Condition of plants in July ☆ good ◇ acceptable [3] Plants were selected from a choice of 9 species

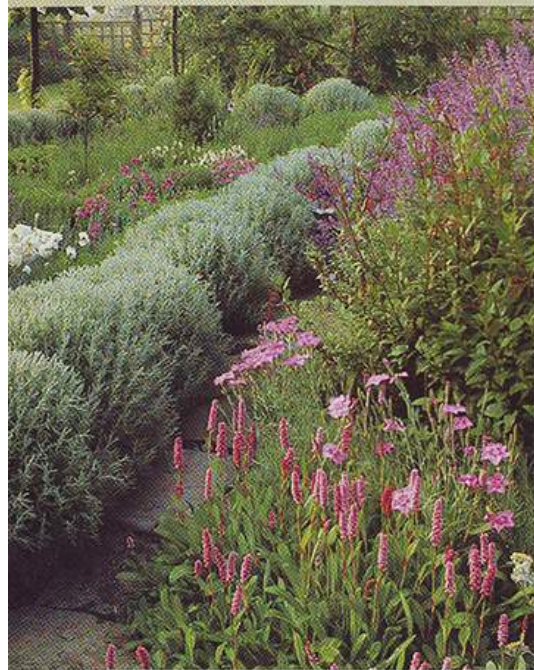
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screen. The glossy dark green leaves of beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) turn golden in autumn, remaining on the shrub throughout winter. Hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) is less frequently planted, but has a similar habit to beech. Its saw-toothed leaves, which senesce to a grey-beige colour, stay on the plant until the next season's leaves begin to appear.

An established hedge also provides protection from the elements. Whether your garden is on an exposed inland site or near to the sea, many plants suitable for hedging will survive the battering and salt exposure as well as helping to filter and calm the wind. *Griselinia littoralis* and the daisy bush (*Olearia macrodonta*) both thrive in the bluggest conditions.



Low-growing aromatic plants make excellent path-side edging. Choose English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*, above) or cotton lavender (*Santolina chamaecyparissus*, below), to bring an extra dimension into any garden



hedging suppliers on trial

Most people buy hedging plants by mail order, so last autumn we set up a trial to compare mail-order suppliers for quality of service and plants supplied. We picked two different and widely grown types of hedging plant to compare six nationwide mail-order suppliers. Our team of anonymous shoppers ordered beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) ranging in height between 60-90cm and cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*) ranging from 30-80cm.

The majority of hedging plants can be supplied bare-rooted, where the plants are lifted from the soil between November and March and sent to the customer as quickly as possible. As long as the roots are kept moist, the plants should survive this transfer period. This is usually the cheapest option, though some suppliers do tell you that up to ten per cent are unlikely to make it through their first year. Most of the plants we bought were supplied bare-rooted, although we bought one set of laurel plants grown and supplied in containers as they weren't available bare-rooted.

On arrival at the test site, all bare-rooted plants were given a good soak in a bucket of water for several hours and then planted temporarily in a suitable patch of ground until the final planting site was prepared. The container-grown laurel plants were stored in an unheated polytunnel. By the end of January, all plants had been transferred to their final positions, planted through black polythene mulch to help in the retention of moisture and prevent the growth of weeds. In the growing season, plants were watered regularly, especially during dry spells. They were individually assessed in July and rated on their general health and amount of new growth.

Our findings

Delivery times varied widely, from less than two weeks to over 12 weeks. Times did not just vary between the different suppliers, but also between different orders from the same supplier. This may have been due, in part, to the unusually wet weather conditions last autumn.

On arrival at our test site, all plants were inspected. Three per cent of beech and nine per cent of laurel failed the minimum British Standard (BS3936 Part 1). In general, though, the condition of the plants supplied appeared to be good and heights were mostly equal to or larger than those specified in the catalogues.

By July, however, there were some big differences in the condition of both beech and laurel plants. We found unacceptable levels of plant losses, much higher than



the expected ten per cent, with many of the suppliers. Nurseries should replace plants that die, but you will obviously have to wait till the following season.

Many of the beech plants, which were all supplied bare-rooted, did not make it through their first season. The worst were plants supplied by Crown Nursery – 70 per cent had died by July, and the majority of those which did survive were in a poor condition. Hopes Grove Nurseries, on the other hand, supplied the best beech plants.

These photographs, taken in August, show the wide variation in the health of our hedging plants after their first season.

The best beech plants, supplied by Hopes Grove Nurseries, all looked fairly healthy. The worst, supplied by Crown Nursery, were mostly dead



The best laurel plants were supplied container-grown by Chew Valley Trees. Among the worst were those from Crown Nursery

All survived their first year in the ground, with only eight per cent in a poor condition by July. They were also the cheapest.

Of the laurel, the container-grown plants supplied by Chew Valley Trees were top-notch, with no fatalities and a considerable amount of new growth in their first year. The best bare-rooted plants came from Hopes Grove Nurseries and Landford Trees. By contrast, at least half of the laurel plants supplied by Buckingham Nurseries, Crown Nursery and Weasdale Nurseries had died by July.

Prices varied widely for laurel. In general, container-grown plants are more expensive than the bare-rooted plants. An exception is Weasdale Nurseries. Their ten bare-rooted plants cost more than double those from Hopes Grove Nurseries, and £10 more than the container-grown stock from Chew Valley Trees.

Buying guide

The bare-rooted plants supplied by Hopes Grove Nurseries were consistently of good quality and none died. Their beech was the cheapest of the lot and their laurel plants were also very reasonable. We have no hesitation in recommending them as our Best Buy.

If you're prepared to pay the extra for containerised laurel, then Chew Valley Trees is definitely worth considering. All their plants performed extremely well and are worth the investment, although it is worth remembering that they were the only containerised laurel plants we tested.

Hedging suppliers on trial

Supplier	Minimum order	Minimum p&p	Delivery time (days)	Beech			Cherry laurel				
				Price of 10 plants	% of plants that died	% of plants alive but poor or very poor	Plant quality [1]	Price of 10 plants	% of plants that died	% of plants alive but poor or very poor	Plant quality [1]
Buckingham Nurseries	None	£4.95	45-76	£9.50	27%	44%	◆	£13.90	48%	8%	◆
Chew Valley Trees [2]	None	£1	14-50	£14.33	43%	43%	◆	£47	0%	0%	★
Crown Nursery	None	£8.50	13-28	£25	70%	20%	◆	£25 [3]	65%	20%	◆
Hopes Grove Nurseries	5 plants per variety	£4.95	36-71	£8.50	0%	8%	☆	£24.90	0%	20%	☆
Landford Trees	None	None	37-88	£17.62	23%	28%	◆	£19.97	3%	8%	☆
Weasdale Nurseries	None	£12.92	12-27	£24.67	30%	5%	◇	£57.57	55%	40%	◆

Key [1] Condition of plants in July ★ very good ☆ good ◇ acceptable ◆ poor ◆ very poor [2] Chew Valley Trees was the only nursery to supply container-grown laurel [3] From this year, only selling pot-grown plants