

Preparation and Planting Guide - Cell grown and pot grown plants

We've outlined below the ideal way to prepare the site and plant a new hedge (for those with the time and energy!) but we hope these notes will still be helpful to those with less time or energy – hedging plants are generally very robust and as long as they get water and are kept free of weeds, most hedges will do well.

Preparation of the site

Even if you are planting small plants, you need to prepare a substantial cleared area ready for a new hedge. We recommend you dig over a trench at least 30cm (12") wide and 25cm (9") deep for small plants (plant height up to 60cm) or wider and deeper for taller plants. Make sure the soil is easily workable. It is really important to remove all perennial weeds. Make sure there is good drainage in the trench by using a garden fork on the sides and bottom to create drainage routes. This will also make it easier for the roots to penetrate the soil and take hold.

Try not to plant:

- if it has been raining heavily as this makes the soil compacted and too "solid" for tiny new roots to grow
- when there is a very cold wind – or at least make sure the plants are out of their pots for the minimum time

If you need to improve the soil you can use well rotted garden compost, well rotted farmyard manure, or any general purpose compost (available everywhere). If the soil is very wet, you could add sharp sand or lime free coarse grit.

All the species we sell can be planted into decent soil without the need for soil conditioners but if you wish you can also add bonemeal to the soil as this promotes root growth. It is very important that the bonemeal does not come into contact with the plant roots or stems (it is a strong fertiliser and can "burn" the plants) so it should be mixed through the soil/compost (just put a handful in the bottom of the planting hole and fork it through – please use a gardening glove at all times when handling fertilisers).

We also recommend the use of the RHS approved RootGrow product, particularly for bare roots. It gives plants a boost of the friendly fungi they use to help them find moisture and nutrients in the soil – use of RootGrow dramatically shortens the time it takes plants to establish and gives vigorous growth. Unlike bonemeal, RootGrow does need to be in direct contact with the roots.

Pot Grown

Because the plants have been grown in pots, they can be left in their pots for a few weeks as long as you keep them well watered. Remember that plants in pots dry out much quicker than plants in the ground, so water them daily if it hasn't rained properly, and keep them in a place sheltered from wind. You can make sure you are watering enough by feeling the weight of the plant in the pot – it should feel heavy with the weight of the water.

The trench where you are going to plant needs to be wider than the root size (ideally up to twice the width of the pot). Gently tease the roots when you remove the pot. Make sure the soil is very moist, ideally using a watering can of water in each hole and allowing it to drain before planting.

Position the plant so that the soil comes to the same level as the soil in the plant pot. Make sure the soil is firmed down well (but not compacted) around the plant so that there are no air pockets where frost could form. Water each plant thoroughly after planting (again a watering can per plant) and you could apply a bark mulch* (see note below) around the base of each plant (but not touching the stem) to suppress weeds, protect from frost and retain moisture.

Cell Grown

These are planted in exactly the same way as pot grown plants but you need to make sure that the root is covered with about an inch (3cm) of soil after planting.

*Note – mulch is useful on lighter soils but can lead to problems on heavy or waterlogged soils where excess moisture is trapped below the surface resulting in root rot. Yew and Box should not be mulched as they are particularly susceptible to disease when moisture is trapped around their roots

Aftercare

It is critical that new plants get the space to themselves so that they can obtain moisture, nutrients and light so weeds and grass need to be kept away from the hedge for the first 2 or 3 years.

Another factor that determines the success or failure of a new plant is lack of water, even in winter when they are dormant and particularly in March, April and May as deciduous plants break dormancy. Drench each plant thoroughly so that the water will get down to the roots. Our guide for dry weather is to use at least 5 litres of water per metre of hedging twice a week. Always water in the evening, so that the sun does not evaporate the water. Evergreens benefit from having their foliage sprayed.

Frosts are another enemy of the immature hedge. If there are heavy frosts after planting, the soil can break up, so the plants may need to be firmed in again. Severe frosts will cause damage to leaves – generally they will recover but weather damage is always a risk you need to be aware of, particularly with new plants. Larger plants generally suffer more than smaller plants, evergreens more than deciduous.

In windy sites, the wind can “rock” new plants opening up air pockets where either frost can get in or roots can be exposed to drying winds. Firm in the plants from time to time. Ideally evergreens need to be sheltered from drying winds during their first winter and growing season. If the weather is particularly severe or the site is subject to strong winds, it would be sensible to put up some windbreak netting to help prevent the plants drying out before their roots are established.

Hedge plants are planted close together so there is competition between the roots for nutrients and the trimming of hedges clips away much of the plant's food-producing unit so an annual mulch of well rotted manure or compost or any annual feed of a foliar fertiliser is helpful to maintain vigour.

In the first year after planting, plants often come into leaf or flower much later than established plants. Evergreen plants (or semi evergreens) often defoliate or the leaves turn yellow when transplanted. Evergreens also have a tendency to defoliate when they first experience warm, dry weather. If your plants experience any of these, just increase the frequency of watering (but don't make them waterlogged) and new leaves will appear.

Please refer to any good gardening book for details of how to prune – the timing of pruning and the amount to be pruned vary by species and depending on whether you want a formal or informal hedge so it is too complex to cover in detail here. However, the general principles are:

- Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Privet should be pruned immediately after planting and the subsequent season's new growth reduced by about half
- Other deciduous species should be lightly pruned when planted and then pruned by one third of the annual growth the autumn after planting
- Evergreens generally do not need to be touched at all until after a full growing season when the side shoots can be trimmed but the main leading shoot should be left until the hedge reaches the desired height.

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