

Preparation and Planting Guide - Root Ball 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.

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 or leaves (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) and watered in well before planting.

We also recommend RootGrow – particularly for root balls. It is a fantastic organic product, recommended by the Royal Horticultural Society. 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. The reason why we particularly recommend it with root balls is because the root balls are evergreens and the need to sustain foliage puts extra strain onto root ball plants during the time when they are lifted, transported and replanted – it is particularly important for root balls planted late in the season (Feb, March, April) because spring growth puts even more stress on the plant and the root needs to be established really quickly to cope with this.

Planting

Root balls can be stored for a few days (keep the root moist and store them in a sheltered garage or shed but not a greenhouse) but ideally they should be planted as soon as possible after delivery.

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 exposed to the wind for the minimum time

Do not remove the string mesh around the roots – it helps to keep the roots from being damaged when you are planting out and will rot away completely over time. Loosen the collar around the stem.

The trench where you are going to plant needs to be wider than the root size (ideally up to twice the width of the root ball) and about the same depth. Fork over the soil in the bottom of the trench and make fork holes in the sides so that the new fine roots can make progress in soil that is not compacted. It is essential to make sure the planting hole is very moist – use the equivalent of a whole watering can of water in each hole and let it drain before planting.

Plant so that the soil comes to the same level as the old soil mark on the plant. Make sure the soil is firmed down well around the plant (but not compacted) so that there are no air pockets where frost could form. Absolutely drench each 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.

It is essential to keep absolutely drenching root balls until they are fully established – see Aftercare section below.

*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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