**Wilder Hedges Proposal for Wilder St Albans**

Hedgerows can be a fantastic habitat for a wide range of wildlife. St Albans district is lucky to still have extensive networks of hedges, both in urban areas and in surviving countryside. Sadly many of the existing hedges are not managed in a way which is wildlife friendly. This note proposes a fresh approach which could be adopted by both public and private landowners.

**Why Wilder Hedges are Great**

Our hedgerows support an amazing diversity of plants and animals, providing wildlife with a rich larder throughout the year: bees and butterflies fly around their flowers in spring and summer, birds pluck berries from their branches in autumn and hedgehogs hibernate winter.

As well as providing food and shelter, hedgerows create vital links across our towns and countryside, helping wildlife to move freely about and keeping populations healthy. They're also good for the landscape and the wider environment, capturing pollutants, assisting with water regulation, storing carbon to help combat climate change, and providing homes for predators of many pest species.

But lack of management, or the wrong kind of management, can lead to them losing much of their value for wildlife. Hedgerows are most valuable for wildlife when there is a reduced cutting intensity. Rotation should be two or preferably three years and avoid sensitive periods for breeding species.

A well-managed hedgerow is thick and bushy, creating an impenetrable barrier to larger animals and a haven for wildlife. The correct management of hedgerows is therefore vital if they are to survive and be healthy enough to provide a good habitat. Hedgerow trees and flowery road verges or field margins adjoining hedges are beneficial. These provide complementary habitats allowing a wider range of wildlife to thrive.

Brown Hairstreak is a nationally rare butterfly which thrives on wilder hedges. This species died out entirely in Hertfordshire 25 years ago, due to excessive hedge flailing. In neighbouring counties populations of this butterfly are expanding in areas where rotational cutting has been introduced. I hope that Wilder Hedges will one day allow it to return to the St Albans area.

**Current Position in St Albans Area**

Far too many of our hedges are either

* **Hollow Hedges** - Over-management by hard trimming to the same height/width each year will ultimately degrade the hedge so it is hollow at the base and provide little shelter for wildlife such as hedgehogs.
* **Overgrown or Collapsed Hedges** - At the other extreme neglecting a hedge will allow it to become tall and overgrown, eventually even to collapse.

Sympathetic management allows blossom and berries to form, allows the hedge to slowly and incrementally increase in size and keeps the hedge in a healthy condition. Eventually though every hedge needs to be rejuvenated from the base and hedgelaying or coppicing are two of the best and most traditional ways of doing this. A laid hedge provides a stock proof barrier and a dense habitat for wildlife but most importantly it encourages new growth that starts a new life cycle of the hedge.

**Proposals**

Wilder St Albans project provides a great opportunity to demonstrate good hedge management principles. Variety is important, so changes should be introduced over time.

* Reduce flailing so that most hedges are only cut once every three years.
* More frequent cuts are restricted to locations where highways, cyclepaths or pavements risk becoming obstructed.
* Hollow and abandoned hedges are laid or coppiced and brought back into condition with the aim of restoring them all over a thirty-year cycle.
* Where there are gaps in existing hedgerows, or opportunities for new hedges, introduce a wide range of native plant species including Alder Buckthorn, Barbery, Blackthorn, Buckthorn, Elm, Hawthorn and Holly.
* Encourage wildflower strips and meadows alongside hedges and establish more hedgerow trees.

Cutting on three-year cycle does not usually require different equipment. Overall there will be cost savings in annual cutting and it is suggested that this is used to finance the restoration of overgrown and hollow hedges.

**Notes and Sources**

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife/managing-land-wildlife/how-manage-hedgerow-wildlife>

<https://www.hedgelink.org.uk/cms/cms_content/files/76_ne_hedgecutting.pdf>

<https://www.hedgelink.org.uk/cms/cms_content/files/78_hedgelink_a5_12pp_leaflet_7.pdf>

<https://butterfly-conservation.org/sites/default/files/habitat-hedgerows-for-hairstreaks.pdf>

<https://www.hedgelaying.org.uk/Default.aspx>

<https://www.gov.uk/countryside-stewardship-grants/management-of-hedgerows-be3#recommended-management>

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24/02/2022