

Hedge cutting season closed at the end of February, so with few exceptions anyone needing to tidy up or trim a hedge will have to wait until September 1st to remain on the right side of the law. Take a moment this week to observe garden birds busying themselves with nest building and you will understand the goal of these regulations. In fact with global climate change, bird breeding seasons are getting into full swing earlier each year, as are the first leaf appearance and flowering of plants.

Section 40 of the Wildlife Acts 1976 to 2012 prohibits hedge cutting and burning of vegetation on uncultivated land during the closed period from March 1st to August 31st. The regulations aim to protect biodiversity during the most sensitive stages of reproduction, primarily for birds but also for the wider range of biodiversity. Under the Single Farm Payment Scheme hedgerows are also a protected landscape feature and maintenance is not permitted during the same period.

Biodiversity refers to all living things and all of the habitats in which those living organisms are found. Farming supports, and is supported by, biodiversity and together they deliver wildlife, food and stable rural jobs. Hedgerows support a rich biodiversity of animals, plants and habitats. These linear habitats act as nature's corridors, along which plants, birds, mammals and insects travel. Ancient hedgerows are a gene pool for our native trees, a vital resource to supply the few remaining scattered native woodlands. Roadside hedges in particular are a haven for native wildflowers which favour poor soils once commonplace in grassland habitats but now rarely seen due to agricultural improvement.

In recognition of the biodiversity and heritage value of our hedgerows, Westmeath County Council completed the Hedgerow Survey Report in 2005, the first of its kind in Ireland. The survey revealed five main hedgerow types: Willow, Hawthorn, Hawthorn/Blackthorn (sloe), Gorse and Species Rich hedges. A typical species rich hedgerow of County Westmeath generally contains those species with some spindle, guelder rose, holly and wild privet. If you are planting a hedgerow consider using these native types, ash or hazel over non-natives such as beech.

The survey found that heavily managed, box cut or A-shaped hedges rarely produced fruits needed to sustain our native wildlife. Allowing a hedge to lose some of its structure or overgrow slightly can completely reverse this. Conservation experts recommend trimming once every three years, and even then, only lightly. So don't worry if you missed the chance to cut a hedge this year, you may have helped conserve Westmeath's biodiversity while also saving yourself a little time and money.

Discover our native wildflowers by joining the Native Woodland Trust on a *Woodland Wildflower Walk* in Ardan Wood on Saturday 11th April, meet at @11 am, Tyrrellspass Castle car park (€4 non-members).