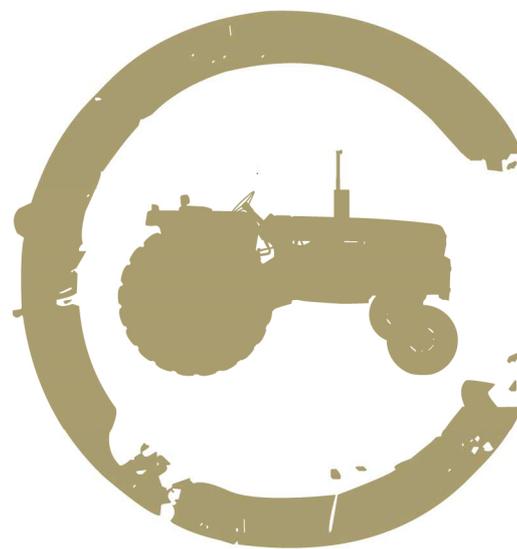


SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE



Community Supported Woodlands and Hedges

Wood fuel and other benefits from small woodlands and hedges
A Tool-kit for Communities - v1.0 July 2013

Chapter 4: The small woodland or hedgerow(s) resource

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Chapter 4 The small woodland or hedgerow(s) resource

The Tamar Valley and its catchment has a plentiful supply of woodlands and hedges with the potential of benefiting from improved management practices, whilst also supporting the ambitions of community supported woodland groups.

These woodlands and hedges are in the ownership of a number of different stakeholders including:

- Local authorities e.g. West Devon Borough Council
- Private charitable organisations e.g. Woodland Trust, National Trust
- Government institutions e.g. Forestry Commission
- Private individuals or companies e.g. farmers, estates or private landlords such as the Pentillie Estate

4.1 Identifying the right woodland and/or hedge resource for the group

It is helpful for the group to develop an understanding of the sort of woodland / hedge they are looking for before approaching potential landowners. This should be based on the interest and needs of the group, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Using an attributes table can be helpful in thinking through the general requirements of the group; and subsequently for assessing a potential woodland / hedge for its suitability.

Woodland / Hedge attributes table

Woodland / Hedge name:	
Attribute	Assessment
Size / area / length	
Ease of Access	
Potential woodfuel yield	
Tree and shrub species mix	
Age structure	
Current uses	
Potential uses	
Potential woodfuel types available	
Other potential products	
Potential amenity uses	
Educational value e.g. local school, Forest School	
Biodiversity, landscape management	
Heritage management	
Management condition	
Existing management plan/schedule in place	
Gradient, slopes	
Designations	

If woodfuel is of interest as an end product it is useful to gain an understanding of how much woodland or hedge is necessary to match the needs of the group. Some rules of thumb are provided in Chapter 1. At the other end of the scale a detailed assessment can be provided by the Estate Production Template and the detailed Farm Audit Tool. These tools are introduced in Chapter 7.

Species are also relevant. A hedge or woodland with a high percentage of good burning species such as ash, beech, oak, hazel or conifers will produce more useable firewood. Hawthorn and blackthorn also burn well, but their thorns are dangerous when felling, logging and stoking fires. Most hedges have some thorn, but a hedge with over 35% hawthorn / blackthorn may not be suitable for a firewood group.

Access should be considered. Difficult access to extract or transport the wood fuel or materials will require

more investment of time, labour and possibly expense, for example if an access track has to be created. Roadside or other easy access to woodlands will require less input to gather the produce. A hedge near a road or track makes it easier to reach and to remove harvested logs, but roadside hedges are unlikely to be suitable, for road safety reasons.

The necessity for chainsaws and other equipment may also be a concern. The age and condition of trees in a woodland or hedge will determine how much chainsaw use will be needed. This in turn will determine the skill and competence level within the group, as well as likely expense for equipment, training, insurance and daily rate of any specialist used. Hedges and coppiced woods with 8-15 years of growth can usually be cut with hand tools; much of the wood in hedges with 15-30 yrs growth will need to be cut with a chainsaw. Neglected coppice woodlands and naturally-regenerated secondary woodlands (on old mining and post-industrial sites) will often be much older than this, requiring extensive chainsaw use. Hedges that have been flailed in the last 8 years may not have enough usable firewood to be worth harvesting.

Finding the right woodland / hedge

A local organisation such as an AONB or regional representative from the Forestry Commission or Woodland Trust may have an inventory of local woodland / hedges or may be able to offer advice. Approaches can also be made to local authorities and private woodland owners in the area, such as local farmers and smallholders.

Other options might be to publicise through a local farmer's store; advertise in a newsletter such as Mole Valley Farmers newsletter; a local association of smallholders newsletter; local papers etc.

Thanks to the Dartmoor Circle Community Toolkit for information within this section

4.2 Getting familiar with the resource and its owner

A good relationship between owner and the community group is essential. Ensure a detailed discussion with the owner before starting, clarifying when the group will come, what area or hedge to work on, where to park and what vehicle may come onto the land, whether the owner will receive payment (in money or logs) in return for the group's work, and if and where wood may be left to dry. It is also important to understand whether the owner has a scheme in place such as an agri-environment agreement (e.g. Entry Level Stewardship) that places conditions on the management of the hedge.

The amount paid to the owner should depend on the quality of the wood, how much the owner helps, and accessibility. Dry logs cost about £100/dumpy bag (in March 2012).

A written agreement with the owner should be drawn up. This is discussed in the next chapter.

To encourage co-operation, invite interested stakeholders and locals to visit the hedges/woods with the owner, so that everyone can find out how they should be managed, and where the group fits in. Ideally, before the cutting season (autumn/winter) make some group visits to the site to explore and consider the attributes listed in the table in section 4.1.

Organised events such as a tree and wildflower identification session with a local wildlife expert; looking for signs of animal life; or a dawn chorus walk in the spring. Children love spotting and art-based activities in woods; the Woodland Trust has a good series of Nature Detective resources¹.

4.3 Understanding the management of the resource

All woods and hedges should have some form of management plan and schedule of work for the group to follow. If one is not already in place, members of the group can compile one and simultaneously become more familiar with the site. This is discussed further below. If the group needs help with this, options might include contacts in the local community woodland network or from the landowner.

¹ http://www.naturedetectives.org.uk/schools/forest_schools.htm

One of the best resources for understanding the different types of management applicable to different woodlands is The Conservation Volunteers publication ‘Woodlands: A practical handbook’.

4.3.1 Identifying what you’ve got

Assessing the attributes of the woodland or hedge will require a fairly detailed understanding of species, habitats and previous land-use patterns on the site. Full observation of the plant life of the wood or hedge will require two or three visits during the year: in winter when the leaves of most trees and shrubs are absent; in spring when the ground flora of the wood comes to life; and in late summer/autumn when the leaves are fully visible and fruits of ground flora and trees and shrubs become available. Having a plant expert on hand to clearly identify and explain the key species of wildflowers, trees and shrubs will give group members a better understanding of the type of woodland or hedge resource they have and therefore what type of management will be most appropriate. Informal surveys of birds, invertebrates, mammals and fungi as well as heritage remains (such as old buildings and earthworks) will provide more information that may determine how the site should be managed. These can also make great days out to entice potential group members and for local schools. Local natural history or heritage societies may be able to offer help with expert guidance, or use the local community woodland network. The landowner is also likely to be very knowledgeable.

Understanding the age and structure of a woodland will help determine its future management and also how frequently the wood can be cut again in the future. For example a woodland comprising only of standard trees, planted sometime in the past *en masse*, will need selective felling and probably a replanting plan, or encouragement of natural regeneration and local seed collection and propagation. However, a previously-coppiced woodland, even if long neglected, can usually easily be brought back into a coppice cycle which may suit the needs of a firewood or woodchip group and can be treated more like a hedge resource in terms of management.

Safety works to trees and structures present on site will need to be considered; this may require bought in assessment for insurance purposes, by qualified tree surgeons or surveyors.

4.3.2 Planning how to manage the resource: what needs to be done, when, and necessary skills and competencies

Woodlands, and in some cases hedges, are supported by a management plan which is a vital tool for user and landowner. It enables clear objectives for the woodland or hedge and the manner in which to achieve them. Each woodland, or woodland group, should have in place a Forestry Commission approved UKWAS compliant management plan. This is a requirement for woodlands over 3ha, and for which a grant should be available to cover the costs of the plan. The discipline of working through the Forestry Commission framework is a valuable process.

Once the survey and assessment have been done, the plan can be written describing the woodland, its position and constituent parts, any risks or hazards. Habitats and biodiversity may also be described. The objectives for its management will be laid out with a supporting schedule of work for delivery.

The Woodland Trust and Forestry Commission have a number of woodland management plans available as examples, and the Forestry Commission has a useful management plan template and detailed guiding notes.

The management plan should be developed and regularly reviewed and adapted by the landowner together with key stakeholders such as the user groups.

From the management plan a schedule of work can be arranged for the coming year, for the following five years, and into the future. This should have details of which areas are to be cut, felled or coppiced in which year, as well as ideas for improving access for the removal of wood products (making a track for vehicle/horse, parking arrangements and stacking/storing cut produce) and possibly for visitors (steps, paths, gates etc).

For a woodland, it is likely that some access improvement will be needed, which may determine where the first

practical work takes place. Further cutting sessions over the winter may extend the access route into the wood. Once access has been cleared it is often useful to look at the woodland in compartments, according to species distribution, slopes, wet areas, and recently cut areas. A whole compartment may be felled or coppiced in one season's cutting, which will create a new temporary open habitat for wildflowers and good tree and coppice regeneration. However if a woodland is identified as being particularly sensitive in terms of shade-loving or other species it may be appropriate to carefully selectively-thin the trees and shrubs with individual felling, coppicing or removal of fallen wood. This will be slower and more difficult due to other standing trees in the way of what is being felled, and this should be taken into consideration. For a hedge the access is often better than for a woodland so it is a matter of deciding with the owner which section of hedge is the priority to be laid or coppiced in which year.

4.3.3 User Group Competencies

The management plan will detail the skills and competencies that the group will need to marshal works in the woodland or for the hedge. These skills can come either from within the group if the expertise is available, or bought in from other groups or contractors. If skills and competencies are present in the group, training may be needed for the necessary certification for insurance purposes, and the additional cost of equipment use or hire will need to be considered. Bought in expertise should be seen as a way to harvest the full extent of useful timber that may otherwise be out of reach or unsafe to gather. Incurred costs can be divided between members or covered by sales of the cut material. If a hedge is to be laid, the group will need an experienced person to select suitable stems and lay them, and can offer experience and training to group members at the same time.

4.3.4 Putting the work schedule in place

The work schedule should comprise a series of sessions during the cutting season (roughly from November to the end of February), with a designated member supervising each session to ensure safety and that the management plan and the terms of the agreement with the owner are met.