

Saving the not-so-humble hedge

Hedgerows connect insect families to each other and provide homes for wildlife as well as looking beautiful. But around half have been ripped out since the 1940s. Now eco-charities are mustering to restore and retain them. With National Hedgerow Week starting on May 28, **Alison Benjamin** looks at just one successful campaign

SPRING

Foxglove
The tall spikes and bell-shaped flowers of this plant add a sculptural focus to the hedgerows June to September.

SUMMER

Elderflower
A favourite with foragers, clusters of cloud-like white flowers appear amid roadside hedgerows from May onwards.

Butterflies
Red Admirals especially love bramble flowers and, along with moths, find a smorgasboard of forage in hedgerows.

AUTUMN

Spindle
Autumn is when the vibrant colours of this plant are at their best. Both leaves and fruit are enjoyed by hedge wildlife.

Bees
From Ivy Bees to Honey Bees, our native bees and other flying insects rely on hedgerows for pollen and nectar year-round.

Bramble
Juicy blackberries are ripe for picking in early autumn and attract as many birds as humans on the hunt for tasty fruit.

Dandelion
A common sight along hedgerows, these bright yellow flowers are another important insect food source up to October.

WINTER

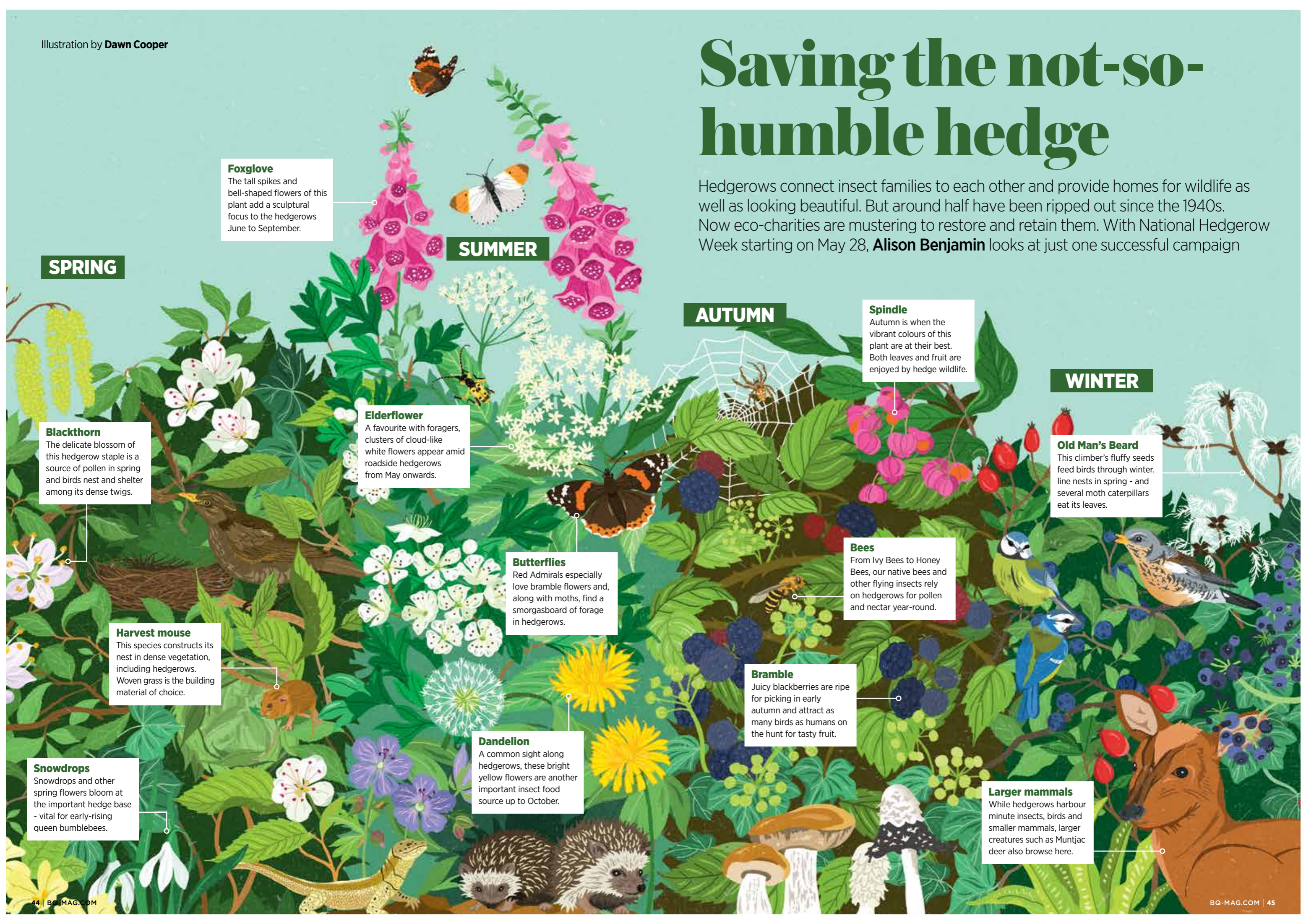
Old Man's Beard
This climber's fluffy seeds feed birds through winter. line nests in spring - and several moth caterpillars eat its leaves.

Larger mammals
While hedgerows harbour minute insects, birds and smaller mammals, larger creatures such as Muntjac deer also browse here.

Blackthorn
The delicate blossom of this hedgerow staple is a source of pollen in spring and birds nest and shelter among its dense twigs.

Harvest mouse
This species constructs its nest in dense vegetation, including hedgerows. Woven grass is the building material of choice.

Snowdrops
Snowdrops and other spring flowers bloom at the important hedge base - vital for early-rising queen bumblebees.



B

EEES FOR DEVELOPMENT, a charity best known for supporting beekeeping in Africa to alleviate poverty may seem an unlikely champion for British hedgerows. But the organisation is leading the call to protect our native hedgerows from being destroyed by mismanagement.

The charity is famous for equipping thousands across the world's poorest countries with beekeeping skills so they can sell honey and beeswax. But Britain came back into focus when Nicola Bradbear, the director, returned from a trip to Rwanda to find all the grass verges cut back in her home town of Monmouth, south Wales.

"We work with some of the poorest people in some of the poorest places in the world and I'd come back to see how we would waste money, fuel and carbon cutting everything back.

"I must have been feeling particularly grumpy that March because we'd had snow and beekeepers were looking forward to our bees getting out to feed on the spring flowers. But the minute the snow melted they were out cutting the verges," she said.

Frustration at the mindless destruction led Nicola to set up Bee-Friendly Monmouthshire in 2013 with a dozen or so like-minded people, to lobby the council to stop the practice.

Although councillors were sympathetic, and under EU rules at that time had an obligation to improve biodiversity, she found she came up against fierce opposition.

"Farmers and other locals, who had contracts to maintain miles of verges and hedgerows, thought they would lose their livelihoods," says Nicola. Undeterred, she mounted a campaign and won.

Monmouthshire council adopted a pollinator policy, which included selective mowing of council-managed verges and green spaces and replacing sterile civic displays of bedding plants with bee-friendly perennials and annuals.

Hedgerows, however, continued to be cut too often, too much and at the wrong times of the year - with devastating consequences for pollinators and other wildlife dependent on their food and shelter.

"Hedgerows are the last vestiges of wild habitat, providing food, shelter, nesting sites and wildlife corridors where animals can travel from one bit of fragmented nature to another," Nicola explains. "It's vital that they are cared for in the best way for nature."

HEDGEROWS CONSIST OF ROWS of mixed species of native trees and shrubs, such as alder, ash, bramble, blackthorn, dogwood, holly and willow, or a single species, like hawthorn, plus the ditches, banks and verges around them.

Originally grown to stop cattle and sheep from roaming and to mark farm and parish boundaries, in the 18th century they were used to enclose fields, which accounts for the attractive patchwork-quilted look of our countryside.

Today, there are around 500,000 miles of hedgerow in the UK. This may be less than half the amount we had in the late 1940s when many

BLACKTHORN



HORNBEAM



HAWTHORN



CRAB APPLE



FIELD MAPLE



HOLLY



DOG ROSE



Pollinator-friendly hedge plants

The Woodland Trust recommends planting five shrubby plants and trees per metre in a double row with one large, boundary tree, such as an oak or rowan, every six metres.

Blackthorn with its clouds of early white blossom brightens up many a motorway verge in early spring and is a good source of pollen and nectar for early foraging bumblebees. Caterpillars of many moths, including Swallow-tailed and Yellow-tailed eat its leaves and in turn are food for birds nesting among its thorny thicket, followed by sloes in autumn.

Hornbeam has yellow male catkins in spring which provide much-needed pollen for bee larvae to develop into healthy adults. It's also a food plant for caterpillars of a number of moth species, including the Nut Tree Tussock. A hornbeam hedge will keep its leaves all year round, providing shelter, roosting, nesting and foraging opportunities for birds and small mammals.

Hawthorn can support more than 300 insects including many moth caterpillars. Its white flowers in May provide nectar and pollen for many wild bee species, hoverflies and other pollinators. Its thorny foliage is nesting and shelter for many species of bird. And its haws are eaten by migrating birds and small mammals.

Crab Apple blossoms provide the first meal for many newly emerging solitary bees including

Red Mason Bees and Tawny Mining Bees. Its leaves are eaten by caterpillars, including the Eyed Hawk-moth, and its juicy fruit is eaten by birds and voles, foxes and also badgers.

Field Maple is attractive to aphids and their predators, including many species of hoverfly. Lots of species of moth, such as the Mocha, feed on its leaves. Its small, unassuming yellow-green flowers provide nectar and pollen for bees in early summer, and birds and small mammals eat the winged fruits.

Holly is known for its bright red winter berries which are a vital source of food for birds and small mammals like dormice, and its leaf litter may be used by hedgehogs for hibernating. But its delicate white flowers feed bees and other pollinating insects. And perhaps most importantly its leaves are eaten by caterpillars of its namesake, the Holly Blue butterfly, along with those of various moths.

Dog Rose is a thorny climber that scrambles through many hedgerows with its pretty dusky pink open flowers and faint sweet scent that attracts an array of pollinators in summer. Its red rosehips provide valuable food for birds and small mammals in the autumn.

How to get involved

The Campaign for Rural England charity's #40by50 Campaign is calling for our hedgerow network to increase by 40% by 2050.

"The government loves talking about tree planting and peatland restoration, but it seems to have forgotten our hedgerows," said a spokesperson.

They are campaigning for them to commit to a target for adding 4,000 miles of new and restored hedgerows a year, starting now.

What you can do: Sign the petition at www.takeaction.cpre.org.uk

What you can do: Sign up for a free 'Talk to the Hedge' guide during National Hedgerow week, May 28-June 5, run by www.hedgeline.org.uk to raise awareness of the value of our hedgerows.

What you can do: Want to learn how to 'lay' a traditional hedge? See www.hedgelaying.org.uk

According to the RSPB, hedgerows support 80% of our woodland birds, 50% of our mammals and 30% of our butterflies.

And more than 1,500 species of insect have been recorded at some time living or feeding in hedgerows

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◁ were ripped out to enlarge fields to maximise food production. But if managed correctly for wildlife they are still Britain's biggest nature reserve.

Hedgerow flowers will feed countless bees and other pollinators, and can yield tasty fruits and berries, like rosehips and sloes, as well as nutritious seeds and nuts for a host of animals. Dried stems become home to overwintering insects, and dense foliage provides shelter and safe nesting sites for many birds.

According to the RSPB, hedgerows support 80% of our woodland birds, 50% of our mammals and 30% of our butterflies. And more than 1,500 species of insect have been recorded at some time living or feeding in hedgerows. Herbaceous plants growing wild at the bottom of hedges such as cow parsley, hogweed and nettles are also food for pollinators including Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock caterpillars - and Orange-Tip butterflies lay their eggs on hedge garlic.

But annual flailing (trimming by tractor-mounted flails whose blades cut through wood) by over-zealous contractors has seen a major decline in many species. These include the Brown Hairstreak butterfly and Lackey Moth whose eggs overwinter on shoots and twigs, and the Small Eggar Moth caterpillar that feeds on hedgerow leaves.

AN INSTITUTE OF TERRESTRIAL ECOLOGY SURVEY found that 9,500km of hedgerows were being removed each year in the 1980s but the same amount again was lost because of neglect and bad management.

Although losses appear to have halted in the mid-1990s thanks to incentive schemes to restore and create hedgerows and a 1997 law making it an offence to remove most hedgerows in England and Wales, many are still flailed brutally. This drastically reduces their benefit to wildlife, turning them into what ecologist Miles King has called 'zombie hedges'. As Nicola explains: "It's so vicious and efficient at reducing the height and spread, it cuts off all the shoots so the hedgerow can't flower."

To remedy this, Bee-Friendly Monmouthshire produced a manifesto setting out simple steps to care for them better (see box). Yet their recommendations are frequently being ignored.

NICOLA KNOWS SHE IS UP AGAINST the British public's obsession with being neat and tidy. But while she may not have been able to save every hedgerow in the UK, or even in Monmouthshire, she is slowly helping to change people's perceptions of how green spaces should look and be managed.

Building on the work of Bee-Friendly Monmouthshire, the county council ran a *Nature isn't Neat* campaign three years ago to show people how sacrificing immaculate lawns and flower beds for messier wild flowers would attract more bees and butterflies. There's now a wildflower meadow beside the Monmouth leisure centre. And the town has significantly reduced the use of glyphosate, a weed killer highly toxic to bees and other insects.

"It used to be a by-law that it was sprayed around every lamppost and bollard. Now we've got poppies coming up around them which people seem to like instead a brown ring of dead weeds," says Nicola. "And there was a hollyhock in a funny place on the A40 and everyone's been talking about it because it looks so nice."

Gradually it appears that local people are becoming more tolerant of the 'weeds' squeezing



HOW TO CARE FOR HEDGEROWS

1 Only cut hedgerows in Jan and Feb when seeds and berries have been eaten and before nesting begins.

2 Only cut once every three years to allow them to flower.

3 If road-facing sides of hedges need to be trimmed for safety reasons, only cut the sides of the hedge each year, but the top only every third year.

4 Never cut hedgerows on each side of a road in the same year.

5 The minimum height for a wildlife-useful hedge is two metres.

6 An 'A' shaped hedge is of most benefit. A wide base is good for ground-nesting birds.

7 Councils and landowners should draw up a plan showing the three-year rotation to share with hedging contractors.

8 With some exceptions, it is an offence for farmers to cut hedges during nesting season, 1 Mar - 31 Aug. It's also illegal for anyone to intentionally damage bird's nests during those dates.

See this and more advice at www.beefriendlymonmouthshire.co.uk

through the cracks in the pavement - the town even has its own 'Rebel Botanists', guerrilla gardeners chalking the names of the pavement's wild flowers.

With a population of 25,000, Monmouth has been a hotspot for people with expertise in bees ever since Bees for Development set up shop there 30 years ago. In 2020, it was officially named the UK's first Bee Town in recognition of the work done by the charity, county council and town council.

It also hosts an annual bee festival. This year the Bee Festival falls on 3 July. Visitors will be able to take a 'bee walk' through town. People can stroll through areas that have been planted for pollinators, from church gardens and wildflower meadows, to the banks of the Wye and Monnow rivers, where solitary mining bees nest. And there's a community orchard with fruit and nut trees planted more than a decade ago by volunteers involved in the Transition Town movement.

Vivien Mitchell of Transition Monmouth applauds the work that Nicola has done. "It dovetails beautifully with our ethos which includes looking after our pollinators as one small part of making towns more sustainable," she said.

"People are becoming much more tolerant of unmown verges. The problem with hedgerows, however, is that you get a team of contractors who don't understand that if you left it a little higher and a little wider and only cut it every three years it would have so much more biodiversity. But they will do it if you show them how it should be done."

As Nicola says, "We are very lucky that people like bees. And if they get it right for bees, they get it right for everything else."

To learn more about Bees for Development and make a donation (the charity is solely funded by the public) go to www.beesfordevelopment.org.

Alison Benjamin is an author, journalist and co-founder of Urban Bees www.urbanbees.co.uk