

Hedge Magic

When we moved into a house in a large field, bounded by a sad, straggly drunken sailor of a fence, the first job we wanted to do was to replace the fence and plant a hedge to make a living border to our land.

My mother had Opinions.

“Privet,” she said. “That’s what you need for hedges. Wosname on that gardening programme said so. Evergreen, and you can cut it into shapes. Topiary.”

We had Opinions, too. Four hundred yards of privet hedge sounded like heaven for any stick insects escaped from the local primary school, but not for anything else. We could walk the whole length of it with a hedge trimmer set to shoulder height and get a square-topped evergreen wall, though you’d see the jagged slice halfway along where we fell asleep from boredom. Instead, we ordered 2,000 bare-root saplings of British native trees from the nearest tree nursery and set to work.

My mother came to inspect our new hedge on a cold sunny day in early spring. The hazel had broken its buds in early March and its acid green leaves were stretching out their pleats, but the rest were dormant - the beech had its old tan leaves from the year before and the holly was dulled by dust. The hedge looked like rows of dead branches stuck into the earth, but when we looked at it, we saw two whole winters’ work, and the day when we planted the final sapling as snow began to fall lightly around us.

My mother saw something different.

“What killed off the privet?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “We didn’t plant any privet.”

“Now, if you’d planted privet all the way along, this would be all green now,” she said. She sighed. “I did tell you.”

I wish she’d lived long enough to see the hedge now. She would have loved it. Robins nest every year in the hornbeams, crows roost in the highest branches of the ash and a little owl sulks in the tallest oak. Dogrose and lilac and crab apple flowers are heavy with bees in

summer and birds enjoy the long buffet of rosehips and haws and wild cherry. The leaves take fire in autumn – those of the birch turn the same bright yellow as the dye it provides, while field maple leaves turn from yellow to red to a coppery brown. Hazel and beech and sweet chestnut provide food for the winter, though it doesn't stop squirrels from raiding the bird feeders like scrumping children. The holly and hawthorn and rugosa are our natural barbed wire to deter human intruders - and if superstition has its roots in truth, the rowan and elder keeps evil away.

The hedge took six years to get to its full strength – more years than my mother had left. We planted the trees as soon as we could, so that we could have a hedge we loved within our lifetime. Let you do the same.