A Homeowner's Guide to Assessing and Planning Hedge Trimming in Surrey

Why a thorough check matters before you start

Hedges define boundaries, provide privacy and soften the landscape around a property. But when a hedge has been left to grow unchecked for a season or two, trimming it back to a neat shape becomes more than a quick clip. Overgrown hedges require a careful assessment before any cutting begins. Rushing in can leave you with bare patches, uneven growth and a plant that struggles to recover. Taking time to inspect the hedge, plan the work and choose the right time of year makes all the difference.

For homeowners in Surrey, where hedges of beech, laurel, privet and leylandii are common, the local climate and soil conditions affect how quickly hedges grow and how they respond to pruning. A systematic approach helps you avoid mistakes and get the best result for your boundary planting.

Check the hedge's condition first

Before you pick up any tools, walk the full length of the hedge and look at it from both sides. An overgrown hedge often hides problems that become obvious only when you start cutting. Check for dead or dying branches, especially in the lower section. If a hedge has lost its leaves at the base, it may need more than a trim, it might require hard pruning or replacement. Look for signs of disease, such as discoloured leaves, fungal growth on the stems or patches where the foliage has thinned. Also watch for woody growth that has become thick and hard. Older stems may need to be cut back to a point where new shoots can emerge, rather than simply trimmed at the surface.

Another important check is for nesting birds. In the UK, it is illegal to disturb active nests. The main nesting season runs from March to August, though some birds may start earlier or finish later. If you see birds entering and leaving the hedge regularly, postpone major work until the young have fledged. Light trimming that does not disturb the nest may be possible, but it is safer to wait.

View the location on Google Maps

Measure the hedge height and width

An overgrown hedge often exceeds the height you want by a metre or more. Before you trim, decide on the final height and width you are aiming for. This is not just about appearance. A hedge that is too tall can cast shade on your garden or your neighbour's, while one that is too

wide may encroach on paths, driveways or the boundary line. For formal hedges, a slight taper, wider at the base than the top, helps sunlight reach the lower leaves and keeps the hedge full from ground level. Measure the current height and width at several points along the hedge. This gives you a clear target and helps you spot sections that have grown unevenly.

If the hedge has become very tall, reducing its height in one go can leave it looking bare for a season. It is often better to reduce the height gradually over two or three years, cutting back to a point where there is still some green growth. The same principle applies to the sides: cutting back hard into old wood may not produce new shoots, especially on conifers. Knowing the growth habit of your hedge species helps you decide how much to remove.

Plan the pruning season

The best time to trim an overgrown hedge depends on the plant type and the amount of growth you need to remove. For most deciduous hedges, late winter or early spring, before new growth starts, is a good time for major reduction. At that point the plant is dormant and will respond with strong new shoots when the growing season begins. Evergreen hedges, such as laurel or privet, can be trimmed in late spring or early summer, after the main flush of growth. Avoid trimming evergreen hedges in autumn, because the new growth may be damaged by frost.

For conifer hedges, such as leylandii, the best time to trim is late spring or early summer, but only into the green growth. Cutting into the brown, leafless interior will not produce new shoots, and the hedge will have a permanent bare patch. If a conifer hedge has become very overgrown, it may be better to remove it and plant a new hedge than to try to reshape it. This is a judgment call that depends on the extent of the bare wood and the overall health of the plants.

Prepare the right tools and safety equipment

Trimming an overgrown hedge often requires more than hand shears. A petrol or electric hedge trimmer with a long reach can make the job faster and produce a cleaner cut. For very thick stems, you may need loppers or a pruning saw. Make sure all blades are sharp and clean before you start. Dull blades tear the foliage, leaving ragged edges that take longer to heal and may invite disease. Check the condition of the power cord or battery if you are using an electric trimmer. For petrol trimmers, ensure the fuel mix is correct and that the machine is in good working order.

Safety equipment is just as important. Wear gloves to protect your hands from thorns and sharp stems, and safety glasses or goggles to guard against flying debris. If you are working at height, use a sturdy ladder placed on level ground and have someone steady it. Never overreach or lean sideways while on a ladder. For hedges that are very tall or dense, consider

hiring a professional. Working at height with heavy equipment is risky, and a mistake can cause serious injury.

For homeowners who prefer to leave the work to a qualified professional, Alpha Tree Care Ltd provides hedge trimming services in Surrey. Their team can assess the hedge, plan the work and carry out the trimming safely and efficiently, handling green waste removal as part of the service.

Clear the area and mark the boundary

Before you start cutting, remove any obstacles from around the hedge. Move garden furniture, pots, hoses and toys out of the way. Lay a tarpaulin or old sheet along the base of the hedge to catch clippings. This makes clearing up much easier and stops trimmings from getting trodden into the lawn or flower beds. If the hedge grows right up to a fence or wall, take extra care not to damage the structure with the trimmer.

It is also sensible to check where the boundary line runs. If you share the hedge with a neighbour, discuss your plans before you start. In many cases, the hedge belongs to both properties, and both owners have a responsibility for its maintenance. Agreeing on the height and shape avoids disputes later. Mark the line you intend to cut to, using string or canes as a guide. This is especially helpful for long, straight hedges where it is easy to drift off line.

Cut in stages and check your progress

Start by cutting the sides of the hedge, working from the bottom up. This lets the clippings fall clear and prevents them from catching on the uncut top. Make the first pass a rough cut, removing the bulk of the overgrowth. Then go back and refine the shape, following your guide lines. Taper the hedge slightly so that the base is wider than the top. This allows light to reach the lower branches and keeps the hedge dense from ground level.

After you have finished the sides, trim the top. For a flat top, use a spirit level or a taut string as a guide. For a rounded or peaked top, work by eye, stepping back regularly to check the shape. Take breaks to clear clippings from the top of the hedge, as a build-up of debris can weigh down the branches and hide uneven areas.

Once the main trimming is done, go over the hedge again to tidy up any missed shoots and to cut back any stems that are sticking out. Pay attention to the lower part of the hedge, where growth is often sparser. If you have cut back into old wood and exposed bare stems, consider leaving some new shoots to fill the gap over the coming months.

Deal with green waste

An overgrown hedge produces a surprising amount of clippings. You need a plan for disposal before you start. Many local councils in Surrey offer green waste collection services, either as a kerbside collection or at a recycling centre. Check what is accepted and whether there is a charge. You can also compost soft, non-woody clippings, but add them in layers mixed with other materials to avoid a slimy mess. Woody stems take longer to break down and are often better taken to a recycling centre or chipped.

If you have a large quantity of clippings, you may want to hire a skip or arrange for a green waste removal service. Some tree surgery and hedge trimming companies offer waste removal as part of their work. **Alpha Tree Care Ltd** includes green waste clearance in their hedge trimming service, so you do not have to worry about disposal after the job is done.

Aftercare: watering and feeding

A hard trim can be stressful for a hedge, especially if you have removed a lot of foliage. Give the hedge a good soak after cutting, particularly if the weather is dry. Mulching the base with organic matter helps retain moisture and suppresses weeds. A balanced fertiliser applied in early spring can encourage strong, healthy regrowth, but avoid feeding late in the season because new growth may be vulnerable to frost. Keep an eye on the hedge over the following weeks and water it during dry spells. If you notice any signs of dieback or disease, consult a professional for advice.

When to call in a professional

While many hedges can be trimmed by a competent homeowner, there are situations where professional help is the better choice. Very tall hedges, those with thick woody stems, hedges that are difficult to access, or hedges that require significant reshaping are all jobs that benefit from a qualified tree surgeon. Professionals have the equipment, experience and insurance to carry out the work safely and to a high standard. They can also advise on the long-term management of your hedge, including the best pruning regime for the species.

If your hedge is overgrown and you are unsure how to tackle it, or if you simply prefer to have the work done for you, contact a local specialist. For homeowners in Surrey, **Alpha Tree Care Ltd** is based in Cobham KT11 2AZ, UK, and can be reached at +44 7976 118434. They provide professional hedge trimming and tree surgery services, ensuring your boundary planting is managed safely and effectively.

Alpha Tree Care Ltd is also on Facebook.