

## BANQUE, HEDGEROW AND TREE MANAGEMENT Guidelines on Best Practice

### INTRODUCTION

The Island's hedgerows, banques (hedge-banks) and dry-stone walls are defining features of our rural landscape, adding beauty and character to the countryside. They are rich in wildlife, providing food and shelter for many of the Island's birds, insects and small mammals. They also serve as corridors connecting habitats together and act as an extension to our woodlands. Many species of wildflowers, including some of Jersey's rarities such as Common Toadflax and Wild Strawberry (both of which have Species Action Plans) find refuge along our grassy banques and hedgerows.

Despite their conservation importance, hedges and banques were originally planted for practical agricultural purposes. They are as much the creations of man as are our granite walls. A thick bushy hedge makes a fantastic windbreak for crops, as well as providing shelter and shade for livestock and wildlife. They serve as nature's sponges, helping to reduce runoff and soil erosion while alleviating water pollution. Hedges form a boundary and are a barrier, keeping livestock in and people out. That said, nature has found this type of habitat extremely hospitable and countless plants and animals now rely on our manmade banques and hedges for shelter and food.

Bare, severely cut sections of banques are susceptible to erosion and loss of stability, whereas a cover of vegetation helps ensure the banques' longevity as it reduces erosion. Without management, however, the roadside banques and hedges would soon become overgrown and obstruct access along roads and reduce visibility for drivers. This is why the tradition of the 'branchage' was established, which is the twice yearly cut of roadside vegetation.

**Using an inappropriate working practice can have a very negative impact on wildlife and the quality of the banque or hedge. This leaflet suggests the 'best working practices', whilst following the Law AND giving the maximum benefit to wildlife.**

### THE LAW

'Branchage' is a French word which means 'branch'. The branchage is an important custom which keeps our roads and lanes clear of vegetation to ensure that there is enough room for vehicles and pedestrians to pass safely.

The Law (Loi (1914) sur La Voirie) - literally, 'Law (1914) on the Road', is over one hundred years old. In accordance with the Law, Parish officials tour their parishes to ensure the Law has been observed. These 'Visite du Branchage' inspections take place every year in each parish in the three weeks from 24<sup>th</sup> June and 1<sup>st</sup> September. Under Article 41 of the Law, at least a week before the Visites, the Connétables publish a Notice in the Jersey Evening Post to inform their parishioners who occupy houses or lands bordering on public roads to cut back the growth along the edge of the public roads and footpaths. This includes all brambles, vegetation and other obstacles encroaching on the public road. A height of at least 12 feet (3.7 metres) must be kept above all public roads and 8 feet (2.4 metres) above footpaths.

**For more information about the Branchage Law, go to <https://www.gov.je/Home/Parish/Pages/Branchage.aspx> <https://www.jerseylaw.je/laws/revised/Pages/25.950.aspx> Alternatively visit your Parish Hall or Parish website.**

## TIMING

### Banques and bottom of hedges

Although the main aim of grass banque management is to maintain access along adjacent roads and paths, sensitive management will also create and maintain a diverse vegetation type and structure to support as many different species as possible. Roadside verge and banque management is similar to the management of meadows and other permanent grasslands, which are often very species rich.

#### **BEFORE COMMENCING ANY WORK, CHECK FOR THE PRESENCE OF WILDLIFE!**

**Visually check for nests and young fledglings and use a booted foot, a gloved hand, a rake or a stick to detect animals such as hedgehogs which often sleep in the grass during the hot weather.**

If banques are cut too early, the annual plants will not be able to set seed and eventually perennial plants will take over. Perennials are often harder to cut and may not provide the flowers which make our banques so attractive and beneficial to wildlife.

In some years it may be necessary to cut early as traffic can be obstructed by lush growth. If this happens, try just cutting the lower few feet of the banque, which will leave the roads clear but will allow plants which are set back from the road to flower freely. If time does not allow for a second cut before the first branchage in June/July, make sure that the vegetation does not overhang a road/footpath and that areas that have been left uncut are cut in time for the autumn branchage in September.

### Trees and hedges

Hedges play a very important role in Jersey and are a defining characteristic of the countryside. They act as wildlife corridors, helping to connect habitats, prevent soil erosion and water run-off, provide shelter and are an important food source. For farmers, they help to control livestock and protect crops from the wind.

Good hedgerow management will help to support an abundance of insects, provide habitat for a wide range of birds and mammals and provide a rich supply of nectar, pollen, fruit and berries for many different species throughout the year.

#### **BEFORE COMMENCING ANY WORK, CHECK FOR THE PRESENCE OF WILDLIFE!**

**Bats (which are a protected species) can inhabit trees at various times of the year and can be found in the smallest of holes. It is illegal under the Wildlife (Jersey) Law to wilfully damage a bat roost, a squirrel drey or an active bird nest.**

Carry out all heavy hedge work in winter. It is better that all tree work, including the cutting of the larger branches, takes place during the winter months of January and February, as this will leave nuts and berries, which are a valuable food source for wildlife, on the trees for longer. This is also the time of year when the wildlife activity within the hedgerow is at its least productive. Cutting early in the spring months can disturb nesting birds and breeding mammals. If possible, try reducing the number of cuts to the hedge, or only cut a part of the hedgerow each year. However, branchage requirements must be adhered to.

The summer cuts on roadsides which are required by the Law should only be, if possible, a trimming of the leafier vegetation which grows over the road. A light cut is often all that is needed at the base of a hedge to remove overhanging vegetation. This will mean that disturbance to wildlife during the busy spring and summer months is kept to a minimum and will help to provide a thicker base cover of vegetation that will not only be of benefit to wildlife, but will also help to stabilise the banques and reduce erosion.

## SEVERITY OF CUT

### Banques and bottom of hedges

Cutting the vegetation so short that the soil is exposed creates the same problems as those in an overgrazed field, with an increased growth of plants like nettles, thistles and docks. Vigorous plants and perennials with rhizomes or taproots can also recover much more quickly and come to dominate. Severe cutting will therefore lead to a banque dominated by nettles, couch-grass, cocksfoot grass, hogweed and other plant species which are fast growing, harder to cut and often less attractive when flowering. This inevitably leads to a loss of diversity in plant species and usually fewer flowers, making the Island's roadsides not only less attractive, but also more difficult to manage.

The Law requires that vegetation is cut to a minimum clearance of 8 feet (2.4m) above public footpaths and 12 feet (3.7m) above roads, measured vertically from the point at which the surface of the road or footpath meets the banques. Therefore, the tops of banques can be left uncut on the first branchage visit (as long as that vegetation doesn't overhang the road or footpath) and then cut to a minimum height of 10 cm on the second branchage – see diagram.

The sides of the upper banques can be cut less severely, leaving the vegetation at a minimum height of 10 cm which not only allows the plants to recover, but will also protect the grass tussocks and root systems which provide essential cover for a wide range of insects. Leaving the grass at this length will also prevent soil erosion, in turn preserving the banque, reducing mud spilling onto the roads and averting expensive damage to stone walls and machinery.

### Trees and hedges

Over-management or trimming a hedge too severely will have a detrimental effect on wildlife. In general, taller, bushier hedgerows provide more wildlife friendly habitats than smaller, thinner hedges. Leaving a denser cover will also help prevent soil erosion and preserve the integrity of the banques. The aim is to create an 'A' framed shape hedge.

Severely cutting back branches with a flail does not leave a 'clean cut' and can lead to infection or disease which may kill the trees. The cutting back of branches should be done with a chainsaw/lopper or similar, and not by a tractor flail.

Be careful not to damage any planted or naturally regenerating young trees which may be hidden amongst the tall vegetation.

To remove a hedgerow, banque or other physical feature defining a boundary is considered to be development under the Planning and Building (Jersey) Law 2002 and requires a planning application.

## INNER MARGIN OF HEDGES

The Law only requires vegetation to be cut along roadsides. A good hedge can still be achieved by allowing the inner side of the hedge to grow. This can be cut every 2-3 years (in winter). Doing so will create a good dense hedge covered in nuts and berries on the inner side.

Avoid trimming hedges between 1 March and 31 July – the main nesting season for birds. Ground cover at the base of the hedge should also be retained all year round as this helps to retain some cover in the hedge itself for sheltering birds and other species.

## EQUIPMENT

It is of less importance what type of equipment is used, rather that the equipment is used properly. Modern machinery in untrained hands can be very destructive.

Cutting with hand tools allows you to be selective. Sickles are good, but time consuming. Strimmers are useful but, in the wrong hands, the cut can be too severe. Growth of 10 cm above the ground should be left where possible. Wildlife, such as hedgehogs, can easily also be killed or maimed unless the area to be worked is checked beforehand.

A tractor and flail gets the job done quickly, but is generally less selective. Only experienced tractor drivers should carry out the cut and, where possible, the flail should be lifted 10 cm above a banque when being used while removing all vegetation impeding the road.

Your Parish Connétable will willingly assist you by arranging to close a road to enable you to undertake work with a tractor carefully and safely. Contact your Parish Hall for further information.

## CLEARING THE CUTTINGS

The Law requires all cut branches and vegetation to be removed. As all growers or gardeners know, an excellent way to promote the growth of weeds is to mulch. If the cuttings from the branchage are left lying, this is exactly what occurs. The same vigorous plants with taproots and rhizomes will have the energy reserves to force their way through the mulch; this will only suppress the annuals and less vigorous plants.

Mulching will only lead to an increase in problem weeds and the banques will lose the colourful diversity of flowering plants. If it is not possible to clear the cut vegetation, make discrete piles at intervals along the banque at the base of tree trunks, so that the majority of the vegetation on the banque itself is not smothered. These cuttings make excellent mulch for young trees and shrubs which are growing in situ, but you must ensure that these cuttings will not be blown or washed into the road.

As with banque management, all tree and hedge cuttings should be removed or piled discreetly along the banque where they will not fall back or be washed/blown onto the road and risk blocking drains

## RARE PLANT SPECIES

If uncommon or rare plants are identified before a cut (some of these are shown on the back page), then consider using a more sensitive management option. Areas containing rare species can be marked off to ensure that they are not flailed and just the overhanging vegetation cut to be in keeping with the Law. This will allow these plants to flower and set seed. Ensure however, that these areas are cut before the second branchage in September. The cut vegetation must be removed.

The following plants can be found on grassy banques and hedgerows. These and several other species are either rare or uncommon. Some of the listed rare plants below are Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species and have detailed conservation objectives written for them. If you come across any BAP species on your land, please contact the Natural Environment Team at Growth, Housing and Environment, who will provide you with advice on their management.

**Common Toadflax** (*Linaria vulgaris*) A BAP species

**Jersey Fern** (*Anogramma leptophylla*) A BAP species typically found on old granite walls

**Wild Strawberry** (*Fragaria vesca*). A BAP species. Bears small strawberry fruits

**Orchids** Pyramidal (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) and Heath Spotted (*Dactylorhiza maculata*) orchids can be found on banques

## PROBLEM SPECIES

**Japanese Knotweed** should be identified on any banques that are to be cut for branchage. This is an extremely invasive plant and should not be cut by strimmer or flail as this only helps to spread the plant along the banque. Please contact the Natural Environment Team at Growth, Housing & Environment (contact below) for advice on the best management practice for this species. A separate management advisory booklet has been written on the control of this plant and is available from Growth, Housing & Environment (search 'Japanese Knotweed' on [www.gov.je](http://www.gov.je))

**Asian Hornet** – always be aware of the possible presence of Asian Hornets which may have a nest in dense hedges or brambles, especially during the second branchage.

<https://www.gov.je/Environment/LandMarineWildlife/Insects/pages/asian-hornet-sighting.-identification-and-reporting.aspx>

## AVOID CHEMICALS

Chemicals do knock back the vegetation on banques and at the base of the hedge, but they also create a bare surface, leading to soil erosion and banque destabilisation. All plant life is lost, leaving no cover or food for animals or insects to utilise, as well as leaving the banque bare and unsightly. The eventual re-growth which occurs will likely consist of perennial plant species, which are harder to control and typically less attractive to insects when flowering.

## SUMMARY

Refer to above for more detailed information on these Dos and Don'ts, but ensure that vegetation does not overhang footpaths in order to comply with the Law

## DO:-

- USE YOUR SKILL TO RAISE THE FLAIL HEAD ENOUGH TO AVOID EXPOSING BARE SOIL.
- DURING THE FIRST BRANCHAGE, CUT ONLY THE SIDES OF THE BANQUE TO A MINIMUM HEIGHT OF 10 CM.
- LEAVE THE VEGETATION UNCUT ON THE TOP OF THE BANQUE, AS LONG AS IT DOES NOT OVERHANG THE ROAD.
- ON THE SECOND BRANCHAGE IN SEPTEMBER, CUT THE SIDES AND TOP OF THE BANQUE TO A MINIMUM HEIGHT OF 10 CM.
- LEAVE TUSsocks OF VEGETATION FOR WILDLIFE WHERE POSSIBLE.
- TRY TO REMOVE ALL CUTTINGS; DO NOT ALLOW THEM TO COVER THE BANQUE OR FALL INTO THE ROAD.
- CHECK FOR THE PRESENCE OF WILDLIFE IN THE VEGETATION, HEDGES AND TREES.
- CONTACT JSPCA IF YOU FIND AN INJURED ANIMAL (TEL: 01534 724331).
- TRY TO IDENTIFY RARE OR UNCOMMON PLANTS AND DON'T CUT THEM ON THE FIRST BRANCHAGE, BUT DO CUT ON THE SECOND BRANCHAGE.
- CUT WITH HAND TOOLS WHENEVER POSSIBLE.

## **DON'T:-**

- **CUT THE VEGETATION AROUND THE BASE OF TREES, SHRUBS OR HEDGES.**
- **DESTROY NESTS OR ROOSTS OR INJURE NESTING BIRDS, BATS, HEDGEHOGS OR OTHER WILDLIFE.**
- **CARRY OUT MAJOR HEDGE CUTTING IN THE BIRD BREEDING SEASON (1ST MARCH—31ST JULY).**
- **CUT SO SEVERELY THAT BARE SOIL IS EXPOSED.**
- **CUT LOWER THAN 10 CM.**
- **USE HERBICIDES FOR ROUTINE BRANCHAGE PRACTICE.**
- **FLAIL OR STRIM JAPANESE KNOTWEED (separate leaflet available – Search ‘Japanese Knotweed’ on [www.gov.je](http://www.gov.je))**
- **LEAVE CUTTINGS SCATTERED ACROSS THE BANQUE.**
- **CUT THE INNER MARGIN OF HEDGEROWS EVERY YEAR, AND NEVER IN THE SPRING OR SUMMER.**
- **CUT RARE OR ENDANGERED PLANTS.**

**For more information and guidance regarding branchage practice and habitat management, please contact either the Natural Environment Team at Growth, Housing & Environment: Tel 01534 441600 or The National Trust for Jersey: Tel 01534 483193. For injured wildlife please contact the JSPCA: Tel 01534 724331**