

Trees for Crofts and Smallholdings

Practical Guide



Trees and hedgerows have been an integral part of crofts & farms for centuries, and in recent years scientific studies have proven the diverse range of benefits that trees provide to land, crops, and livestock. So why would crofts and smallholdings, where available space is already at a premium and every corner of land is being managed, potentially want to plant more trees? And what trees should you plant?

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Benefits of Trees on Crofts

- Provide valuable shelter to livestock, reducing exposure to heat, wind and rain and improving animal health.
- Can reduce soil evaporation and transpiration and improve water retention in drought periods, also reducing the “wind chill effect” on exposed fields in cold weather.
- Improve soil health by limiting erosion and stabilising banks, as well as moderating soils prone to flooding/waterlogging.
- Can be a source of fodder to supplement livestock feed, as well as supporting pollinators like bees, butterflies & other insects.

Tree Species Selection

Choosing the right tree for the right site is one of the key factors in the success or failure of its establishment. Each tree species has a range of conditions they have adapted to survive in, and decisions on species choice and planting location should be taken using the Ecological Site Classification tool (ESC) www.forestdss.org.uk/geoforestdss , & using local knowledge/expert guidance.

Downy Birch, *Betula pubescens*:

One of the most resilient and tolerant species of trees, Downy Birch is a pioneer species which will establish itself naturally in many areas across Scotland. Tolerant of a wide range of soil conditions, exposure and altitude, it can grow in most soils including damp/peaty soils, or on rocky shallow soils amid heather. A good source of firewood. Does not tolerate pruning/cutting back, so avoid using in hedges.



Rowan; Mountain Ash, *Sorbus aucuparia*

Very resilient & hardy pioneer species, Rowan features strongly across Scottish hillsides, growing in a wide range of habitats including high elevation mountainsides and rocky gullies. Flowers with white blossom in May providing early source of pollen for bees, and its berries in autumn support wildlife at a crucial point whilst they are preparing for winter/migration.



Hawthorn, *Crataegus mongyna*

Forms a thick, thorny hedge ideally suited for dividing fields and sheltering livestock. Tolerates most soils apart from permanently flooded ground, and can survive hard pruning once properly established. White spring flowers are a favourite of bees & pollinators, and the red autumn berries support a huge variety of wildlife.



Tree Species Selection Cont.

Alder, *Alnus glutinosa*

A fast growing, undemanding tree which is at home on moist soils— particularly around rivers and lochs. Can grow on very poor soil due to its ability to utilise atmospheric nitrogen, and is often used for landfill reclamation sites as a result. Moderately tolerant of salt spray so can be used to provide shelter from coastal winds on exposed sites.



Goat Willow, *Salix caprea*

Very fast growing species suited to damp soils, bogs and wet ground. Willow is often used to stabilise riverbanks, and is also used to form thick screens along motorways and commercial sites. Ideally suited for providing livestock shelter/screening, the foliage is also of high nutritional value and was historically an important source of fodder.



Gean; Wild Cherry, *Prunus avium*

A lowland species better suited to deep, fertile soils with a good water supply. Not tolerant of exposure but very winter hardy. Rarely found above 300 metres in elevation. A very attractive tree with a typically wide canopy casting plenty of dappled shade, flowering early in spring and supporting huge populations of pollinators, and providing cherries for wildlife in midsummer. Gean grows faster than almost any other species in tree shelters, but is heavily susceptible to deer damage.



Hazel, *Corylus avellane*

A small, multi-stemmed tree that tolerates exposure to strong winds and frost well, growing on moist deep soils or clay, but not on sandy soils or peat. Won't tolerate salt spray, so not a species for near coastal areas. Leaves were valued for cattle fodder historically, and the stems can be coppiced to produce stakes/fencing/pea and bean sticks. Hazelnuts are produced typically after 10 years, and are edible (if the birds and squirrels/dormice don't get them first).



Scots Pine, *Pinus Sylvestris*

One of the largest trees listed in this guide growing up to 35 metres in height and frequently grown for commercial timber in the UK. An adaptable tree which can survive on a multitude of sites including nutrient poor soils and heather-covered hillside— drought tolerant (once established), it prefers well-drained sites and will not tolerate salt spray. The evergreen canopy provides shelter year-round, and is commonly found on field margins of crofts and farms all over Scotland. Grown commercially, it produces construction-grade timber, but also has uses in fencing & firewood.



Beech, *Fagus sylvatica*

A firm favourite for hedgerows & shelterbelts, Beech can be kept clipped as a hedge, or allowed to develop into a mature large tree (or managed as both, in form of a hedgerow with standards). Not a 'native' tree for much of Scotland, it prefers sunny, fertile soil with good moisture, and can be planted in coastal areas. Once established, it is very tolerant of exposure, but will need attention in early years to avoid being overrun by weeds. Its timber is valuable as both lumber and firewood.



Further Guidance

Ground Preparation: www.fas.scot/downloads/ground-preparation/

Plants and Planting Methods: www.fas.scot/downloads/tn691-plants-planting-methods/