People commonly plant hedges to delineate property lines, create visual screening and windbreaks, and to provide colorful foliage, flowers and berries. Hedges can also be planted to attract wildlife. They provide food (flowers, fruits and seeds) and dense cover for resting and escaping from predators. For nesting purposes, many of our common songbirds (cardinals, towhees, mockingbirds, brown thrashers, etc.) require the low, dense shrubby growth characteristic of hedges. The linkage of many individual hedges throughout a neighborhood forms valuable travel corridors which many birds use to move safely throughout their territories.

To increase the number and variety of songbirds in the urban landscape one of the most important things that a landowner can do is plant a mixed hedge along the borders of their property. A variety of foods can be provided throughout the year by combining deciduous and evergreen species that flower and fruit at different seasons. There are many small trees and shrubs that can be used but the fruits of native plants such a wax myrtle, yaupon holly, beautyberry, hawthorn, Chickasaw plum and cherry laurel are particularly attractive to songbirds.

Just as important as the composition of the hedge is its structure (shape and form). It is important to provide a hedge with multiple layers because many songbird species prefer to nest at a particular elevation. Ideally a three-layered pattern, one that resembles the structure of a natural forest edge, should be the aim. To create this effect, a row of small trees is planted first. In front of these go the large shrubs which are followed with a bank of low shrubs. Spacing of the plants should be wide enough to accommodate their
mature sizes. Many shrubs tend to thin out at their bases so it’s important to manage the mixed hedge to enhance flowering and fruiting and to preserve the density of vegetation in each layer. This can be done in two different ways – selective pruning and coppicing.

Selective pruning is the cutting of individual stems. By pruning a little bit over the whole length of the hedge on a regular basis, the continual growth of young vigorous sprouts is encouraged and flowering and fruiting is enhanced.

Coppicing is the practice of cutting off the whole shrub top to stimulate the sprouting of many new stems resulting in a much bushier plant. The desired multilayered structure of the mixed hedge can be preserved by coppicing individual shrubs or small groups of shrubs every three to five years. Coppicing causes the shape and form of the hedge to change over time as small gaps are created in different locations every few years. These gaps further increase the structural diversity of the hedge by providing small patches for grasses and wildflowers to grow.

Cutting should be planned to avoid negative impacts on nesting songbirds. Pruning and coppicing are best done during the winter when plants are dormant and before songbirds begin nesting. If cutting is necessary during the breeding season it should be done lightly and selectively.

Remember to leave some dead wood standing within the hedge for perching sites and feeding areas. During the breeding season some male birds seem particularly attracted to isolated dead branches for singing, especially when there is dense escape cover nearby. Dead wood also harbors a wide variety of insects which attracts bark-gleaning birds such as woodpeckers and nuthatches.

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