

# GREENING THE HIGH STREET

A guide to sustainable planting in our communities

# INTRODUCTION

High streets are at the heart of our communities, where people live, socialise, work, shop, and access services. However, high streets locally and nationally have faced challenges over recent decades including changes in how people shop, increased out of town shopping and leisure, the popularity of online shopping, rising overheads, as well as the challenges faced by Covid-19 and increases in the cost of living.

Some of these challenges have also created opportunities that now attract different people to the high street, and for a variety of reasons. Some people are using their local high street more often, for example if they are working from home. We therefore recognise the challenges our high streets face and the important role our communities play in supporting their future.

This is why we are committed to introducing new ways of planting flowers and shrubs in our high streets. This will improve the attractiveness of high streets to benefit local residents, visitors, businesses, as well as helping create spaces for nature and helping to respond to climate emergency priorities. New planting schemes will also help improve air quality in urban areas.

Climate change is making local weather less predictable and the top two risks in the UK are flooding and extremes of temperature. Increasingly local climate change impacts will have a visible effect on our high streets and the good news is that greening urban spaces can help to provide cooling and respite to people in times of extreme heat and help to slow the flow of sudden heavy rainfall.

Hedges can also be important for people and for wildlife. Planting low hedges alongside roads can reduce the impact of air pollution, and a recent study by the University of Surrey found that hedges can reduce pollution exposure of pedestrians by up to 63%.

This guide aims to provide guidance and top tips to community groups who are interested in starting or continuing to actively support sustainable planting schemes in high street areas. Selecting the right plants to cope with climate change and thinking about ongoing management will ensure longer term benefits. If you are planning to set up a community group; useful information and links on how to get started and begin working together are also included.



### Plant choices for resilience

Plant species should be chosen within the context of increased capacity to be resilient to changes in climate and to contribute towards nature recovery. The list of plants in this brochure has been compiled as a selection suitable for urban verge areas and planters with the main criteria being pollinator friendly and/or suitable for dry conditions. The plants will potentially need to survive with a low maintenance regime and be suitable to the varied conditions and location.



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### Maintenance

All planting will require suitable maintenance. Shrubs will require pruning after flowering and to maintain size and shape. Herbaceous perennials will either require deadheading and tidying in autumn/winter, or they may be left in the winter to be cut back in spring to promote fresh growth for the forthcoming season. Routine thinning may also be required.

### Planting in urban verge areas

Planting in the ground is preferable to using planters, if space allows, as plants can be established for long term benefit and will need less regular maintenance and ongoing watering. Some high street areas may have verge areas that could be suitable for improving with alternative planting. Where there is the opportunity to plant directly into the ground in larger borders, native shrubs like Guelder Rose, Spindle, or Viburnum lantana could also be considered for its value to wildlife, however, sizing need to be taken into account.

Unused fringes, thresholds and verges could be planted with native wildflower plug plants. With all these choices, approval should be attained from the council prior to planting.

If you know of a council-owned verge area that you would like to work on, you will need to enter into an agreement with the council to improve and maintain it. Please refer to the later section on licences.



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### Planting design

A suitable design is needed according to the position of where planting will take place. For example; is the space or planter location in a shady or sunny position? Style and taste will also dictate the form of planting. Some planting schemes may require predominantly hardy evergreen shrubs for structure and ease of maintenance. Others may require a more naturalistic approach.



### Using planters

There are many styles and sizes of planters on the market. Some will be longer lasting and easier to maintain than others. Some planters now include water reservoirs or self-watering systems. These are a good consideration to ensure water isn't wasted and ongoing maintenance is easier.

You will need to ensure that planters are positioned in the right places without causing any accessibility issues for people. There will need to be a width of more than 1.8m between a planter and any other feature or building to enable access for wheelchairs and buggies. Some planters are designed to be movable which could offer more flexibility for smaller spaces, especially if local events take place in the area.



Hanging baskets would be less preferable to planting the ground or in containers as they are heavily dependent on a lot of watering. They do make a visible impact to the high street where space is limited, and there are some innovative designs that could provide an alternative. However, there are some innovative designs available that could provide an alternative where space on the ground is limited. These are suitable for perennial type planting, installed on light columns and include self-watering systems.

### Compost

If you are buying compost, peat-free composts are the best choice for the environment. Going peat-free helps conserve peat bog habitats and the carbon they store. From 2024 you will only be able to buy peat-free compost as the government introduces a ban on peat composts.

If your group has a larger plot of land that they manage, there may be space for composting on-site. This will provide a way to get rid of unwanted green waste as well as providing a source of organic matter to improve the soil.



### Watering

Any planting scheme will need to consider the amount of watering and ongoing maintenance that is required. Using the right plants to minimise watering or thinking sustainably about watering will help create a more environmentally friendly solution.

If there is space on the high street, there are lots of different designs for water butts which can create a cost effective and sustainable source of water. Some narrow water butts may be suitable to fit on a downpipe. Many downpipes on high streets run straight onto the pavements, and during extreme rain can cause surface flooding. Even if the water is not used for watering the planting schemes, they can slow down the flow of water which will prevent the inundation of surface water. A “slow leak” can be put on the butt to ensure the water can run off slowly, to go into the drain.

Try to position the water butts near planting areas, or where water can run off into a nearby tree pit or rain garden, which is a shallow area of ground planted with plants that can stand waterlogging.

You will need to seek permission from any landowner prior to installing water butts and you will need to ensure they are not blocking access to footpaths or shops.

Thinking about who will be watering, and maintaining the planting is essential when you are planning your schemes and looking for funding. Gaining local support, perhaps from businesses or community groups, may help spread the work and cost of ongoing maintenance work.

If you need to contract out watering for the planting schemes in the high street, the contractor could use the water butts in the first instance. It could also be useful to ask whether they use rainwater or grey water sources, as this could aid your decision making when choosing a contractor.

### Trees

Trees can help provide habitats for insects, birds, and other wildlife. They also create shade and cool the air around them in the urban environment. Unfortunately, space can sometimes be limited in our high street areas to allow trees to grow to maturity. We do not recommend trees in planters, as they require extensive ongoing maintenance, and the limited



available root space reduces their growth and expected lifespan.

We recommend that trees are planted in the ground where space allows. If you have identified any area that could be a suitable for a tree, the council will need to assess the location. The council will need to ensure there is a suitable rooting environment for the tree to develop that will not impact on the pavement, road or nearby properties.

Availability of funding for tree planting is increasing and there may be a grant available to suit your groups ambitions. We have listed some grant providers in the useful information section.

### Green roofs and green screens

Green roofs are where a roof is retrofitted with planting. They create a little haven for wildlife, pollinating insects and helping to increase the amount of space for nature in the urban environment. They also help by absorbing rainwater, reducing the urban heat island effect, and capture particulates from the air. You may notice that some bus stops have started being retrofitted in urban areas, however, not all bus stops are suitable to have green roofs and they can be expensive to install.



Sedum mats could also be considered for installing on the roofs of places such as shops, porches, cycle sheds or covered seating areas. These generate cooling, flood resilience and pockets of biodiversity dotted around the high street.

Green screens could also be an option where space is limited. These planters are usually planted with climbing perennial or hedge type plants supported by frame and take up very little space on the ground. They are free standing so can be placed anywhere to provide an instant “greening” effect.

### Bird and insect boxes

There have been large declines in urban bird populations and insects in the UK. You may want to include some boxes in your project to support these.

Swift boxes are ideal for the high street environment. Swifts are beautiful to watch and can be a real draw to a high street or urban area. Swifts have declined by approximately 53% since 1995, so are in need of all the help we can give them. They do need food and water sources so should be linked to other efforts to increase biodiversity and ensure other nearby public open spaces have some open water sources. Sparrow boxes would also be suitable. The house sparrow is now on the red list of conservation concern.

You may have a local community groups that may be willing to make some boxes. But you will need permission from the property owner to put up a box. Guidance on where to site and how to make boxes can be found in the useful links section.

### Licence agreements

Once you have an idea of where and how you might want to manage a verge area or install some planters, and have funding awarded in principle, you will need to find out if a council licence agreement is also needed. These are in place if the site is council-managed to ensure there is agreement with the proposals for installation and any ongoing maintenance requirements. Our officers will be able to discuss this with you and meet you on site to discuss your proposals. Please contact [highstreets@southglos.gov.uk](mailto:highstreets@southglos.gov.uk)



# PLANT LIST

This list is a small selection of possible choices of plants for verges or planters containing a range of different structures and seasonal interest. Each verge or planter will need to be designed according to required conditions and desired visual appearance. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

## SHRUBS

*Artemisia arborescens* 'Powis Castle'  
*Artemisia ludoviciana* 'Silver Queen'  
*Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* var. *repens*  
*Choisya ternata* 'Sundance'  
*Euonymus fortunei* 'Silver Queen'  
*Fatsia japonica*  
*Hebe* 'Red Edge'  
*Hebe* ssp  
*Laurus nobilis*  
*Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote'  
*Lavandula angustifolia* 'Rosea'  
*Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Miss Jessopp's Upright'  
*Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus Group'  
*Santolina chamaecyparissus*  
*Skimmia rubella*

## HERBACEOUS

*Achillea filipendulina* 'Coronation Gold'  
*Achillea* 'Paprika'  
*Ajuga reptans* 'Burgundy Glow'  
*Anemone* hybrids 'Honouring Jobert'  
*Aster* 'Purple Dome'  
*Bergenia* ssp  
*Cistus* 'Gordon Cooper'  
*Cistus* × *lenis* 'Grayswood Pink'  
*Echinops bannaticus* 'Taplow Blue'  
*Erigon* 'Dunkelste Aller'  
*Erigeron karvinskianus*  
*Eryngium* × *zabelli* 'Jos Eijking'  
*Geranium* ssp  
*Helleborus* × *hybridus*  
*Lychnis* 'Hill Grounds'  
*Origanum* 'Rosenkuppel'  
*Perovskia* 'Blue Spire'  
*Phlomis tuberosa*  
*Primula vulgaris*  
*Salvia lavandulifolia*  
*Salvia* × *jamensis* 'Peter Vidgeon'  
*Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna'  
*Sedum spectabile* 'Herbstfreude'



*Eryngium zabelii* - 'Big blue'

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*Erigeron karvinkianus* - 'Mexican fleabane'

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*Scabiosa columbaria* 'Butterfly Blue'  
*Verbena bonariensis* 'lollipop'

**GRASSES**

*Carex oshimensis* 'Evergold'  
*Deschampsia cespitosa* goldtau  
*Festuca glauca* 'Elija Blue'  
*Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Red Head'  
*Sisyrinchium striatum*  
*Stipa tenuissima*

**BULBS**

*Alium* ssp  
*Crocus vernus*  
*Eranthis hyemalis*  
*Galanthus nivalis*  
*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*  
*Muscari armeniacum*

**TREES**

**Small**

*Cornus mas*  
*Crataegus laevigata* 'Pauls Scarlet'  
*Crataegus monogyna* 'Stricta'  
*Lagerstroemia indica* 'Red'  
*Prunus* 'Pandora'

**Medium**

*Acer campestre* 'William Caldwell'  
*Acer x freemanii* 'Armstrong'  
*Betula nigra*  
*Prunus avium* 'Plena'  
*Prunus* 'Sunset Boulevard'  
*Pyrus calleryana* 'Chanticleer'

**Large**

*Corylus colurna*  
*Liquidambar styraciflua*  
*Liriodendron tulipifera*  
*Platanus x hispanica*  
*Tilia platyphyllos*



*Crocus vernus*

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# USEFUL WEBSITES AND INFORMATION



## **VOLUNTEERING AND GROUP SUPPORT**

[Volunteering in South Gloucestershire parks and open spaces](#)

[Open Spaces Volunteering Handbook, Getting started](#)

[Open Spaces Volunteering Handbook, Working on site](#)

## **PLANTING AND WILDLIFE**

[Forest of Avon Trust who support tree planting in our region](#)

[RHS advice on drought-resistant plants](#)

[RHS choosing shrubs and trees native to Britain](#)

[RSPB advice on planting shrubs for wildlife](#)

[RSPB information and advice on Swifts](#)

[RSPB how to make a home for Swifts](#)

[RSPB create a sparrow street](#)

## **FUNDING**

[South Gloucestershire Council grants](#)

[Voscur who support voluntary and community action projects](#)

Tree planting grants are available from the [Forest of Avon Trust](#), [The Tree Council](#) and the [Woodland Trust](#) also give away tree saplings.

## **CONTACT US**

If you have an enquiry regarding this brochure, please email

**[highstreets@southglos.gov.uk](mailto:highstreets@southglos.gov.uk)**

or call **01454 868000**.

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