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Hedges can provide screening and soften hardscapes in your yard

By Laura Murphy

If you have long expanses of walls or fencing around your property, a great way to soften them is by planting green hedges along some of their expanse. Hedges can break the monotony of bare walls. They can also be used to separate areas within the yard. Work and storage areas can be screened with hedges. Some people also prefer to hide utility vegetable and herb gardens from their patio or other activity areas.

Hedges are usually thought of as being straight, long and formal. But, in fact, hedges can take many forms. Some hedges are curved. Some are short sections of only a few plants. Hedges do not require formal sheering. Many are allowed to grow in a more or less natural form. On these informal hedges, hand pruning rather than sheering is done to keep growth in check.

Good plants for hedging are available for most any situation. Narrow, upright growing varieties are excellent for using in tight or limited spaces. These include; Yew Podocarpus (*Podocarpus macrophyllus*), Hollywood Juniper (*Juniperus chinensis* 'Torulosa'), Photinia (*Photinia fraseri*), Heavenly Bamboo (*Nandina domestica*), Japanese Mock Orange (*Pittosporum tobira*), Japanese Privet (*Ligustrum japonicum*) and Glossy Privet (*L. lucidum*).

Hedging plants for larger areas include; Oleander (*Nerium oleander*) Greek Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*), Hopbush (*Dodonaea viscosa*), Xylosoma (*Xylosoma congestum*), Arizona Rosewood (*Vauquelinia californica*), and Viburnums (*Viburnum suspensum*, *V. tinus*).

Some things all good hedging plants do have in common are relatively small leaves and a dense habit of growth. This is especially true if the hedge is to be kept in a formal, sheered fashion. Sheering large-leaved plants looks unattractive as the leaves become tattered and torn.

Plants with dense foliage are also best for hedging, especially if the hedge is used for screening purposes. Leaves spaced closely together on the stem is a good indication of the density of growth. If the purpose of the hedge is for screening, then select plants which are evergreen for year-round effect.

The spacing between plants used as hedges is very important. Too close and the plants will crowd each other and not grow healthy. Too far apart and the plants will take too long to fill in the hedge. The spacing should be determined by the mature spread of the plant. You can find this information in plant reference books. Some, like "Plants for Dry Climates" give recommended spacing for plants used as hedges.

In general, the space between plants should be one-third to one-half their mature spread. For example, Photinia has a mature spread of about 6 feet, so they should be planted 2 to 3 feet apart to create a hedge.

Hedges are best planted by digging a trench rather than individual holes. This allows for easy root development and consistent top growth the length of the planting. A cup of ammonium phosphate (16-21-0) or other high phosphate fertilizer can be mixed into the soil for every 3 feet of trench length. The phosphate will help stimulate root growth. As always, be careful to plant plants at the same depth they were growing in the pots. Planting too deep will cause the slow demise of the plants.

Begin training your hedge the year after planting. Each spring, prune back the top and sides. This will stimulate a thickening of the hedge. The top of the hedge can either be flat or rounded. Flat tops are easier to cut, but rounded tops have a more pleasing appearance.

As the hedge continues to grow, prune so that the base is wider than the top. This will prevent shading at the bottom of the plants and insure that the sides of the hedge remain thick and full. If you are training a formal hedge, it may be necessary to sheer the plants several times each year. Keep this in mind as you determine the type and form of hedge that will be practical for you to maintain.

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