

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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These days it is becoming acceptable and environmentally correct to plant large areas of small trees, shrubs, ornamental grasses, and flowers in the front of the house replacing the more customary sweeping front lawns. This type of planting, in addition to giving more privacy, attracts more wildlife and birds to the garden, and once established, will take less water, fertilizer, and herbicides than grass. It will take money and effort to kill the grass and choose and plant the shrubs, but if it is well mulched, will be more care free and enjoyable.

If privacy is desired, plan to use enough evergreens to accomplish this goal with a mix of conifers (small pines or upright junipers, broad-leaved evergreens, such as holly, camellia, Pieris japonica (lily-of-the-valley shrub), Arbutus unedo (strawberry tree), manzanita, or rhododendrons. Then add layers of deciduous plants for seasonal interest. Shrubs such as variegated redbud dogwood (Cornus stolonifera 'Elegantissima') for summer and winter interest, a witch hazel for fragrant February bloom and fall color, Viburnum bodnantense 'Pink Dawn' or burkwoodi for fragrant winter bloom, several shrub roses ('Bonica' is a good one) for summer flowers, and a buddleia (butterfly bush) for late summer bloom. For color contrast Cotinus coggygria (smoke tree) 'Royal Purple' with a Berberis thunbergii (Japanese barberry) 'Rose Glow', and a Callicarpa bodinieri giraldii (beautyberry), which has small lilac flowers, pinkish purple leaves when they fall, followed by small violet lilac berries in the fall, are possibilities.

Grasses and sedges make perfect additions to this "thicket" style planting as they give quick coverage and continuity in plant form and foliage texture. Miscanthus sinensis varieties are good, but be sure to check their size because, although they stand all winter to add interest to the garden and shelter for birds, most have to be cut back in spring and that can be a hard job.

Native vine maples or Japanese maples, some Euonymus alata (winged euonymus) Nandina domestica (heavenly bamboo), along with Japanese blood grass will give splendid fall color and finish the basic planting. Vines, ground covers, bulbs, or perennial flowers could be added, now or in the future.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.