

Privacy Screens

By Everett Chu
August 4, 2017



The many benefits of privacy screens

If our home landscape is meant to evoke a feeling of protection and peacefulness, then screening for privacy must be high on our list of desirable features. These characteristics are often related, such as reduced noise, a break from harsh winds, moderation of heat and cold for the home and backdrops for other landscape features.

Screening can prevent people from looking into or trespassing onto our property and hide unpleasant views of objects outside of our garden. In a narrow space, like a side yard bordering the neighbor's house, a manmade fence may be more practical; but in other cases, a living fence with suitable plantings can be less expensive to install and maintain.

Enclosure is an important principle in landscape design. In this instance, a tall, formal, clipped evergreen wall of single-specie trees (e.g., arborvitae) may come into mind, but it doesn't have to be that way. Such monotonous arrangement runs a high risk of having irregularities in a portion of the planting due to localized environmental or pest stress. A mixed-planting hedge (called hedgerow) mitigates such risk and offers much better returns for its biodiversity and aesthetic values.

Privacy screening does not have to be all-or-none. Instead, it can be in-between and implemented at several functional levels or treated as a progression in time.

The first level is a simple buffer of low screen, creating separation and reducing the unpleasant situation. Removing a strip of lawn along the curb or the property line and installing a simple flower bed could begin to create a sense of partition and boundary.

The second level is a physical barrier such as a berm or terrace walls. Such barriers could also redirect traffic from visitors and reduce the invasion from unwanted wildlife (deer, raccoon, rabbits, etc.).

The third and ultimate level is the screen. It may be from a mature buffer or barrier over time.

Before settling on a layout, find out if there is regulation on the heights or types of planting from the homeowner association, city and county. Ensure that the intended screen would not block the view of vehicle traffic. Then determine the precise locations and preferred height of the screen using the line of sight and with the aid of wooden stakes or ladders. Verify that the mature width of the hedge would fit within the available space.



A privacy screen makes this seating area comfortable and inviting. *Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

The spacing of the plants should be according to the chosen hedge plants. To avoid root crowding, there should be a minimum of 2 feet between plants but preferably 3 feet or more. On the other hand, slender plants that take years to fill in the gap should require a tighter spacing. Pleaching is a technique of weaving (or tying) branches together to strengthen and fill empty spots until the plants thicken, thereby reducing the needed quantity of plants.

To achieve a high degree of screening effect year-round, the use of predominantly evergreen plants may be favored. Still, including deciduous plants in the lineup may offer better seasonal colors and other benefits.

The following are examples of evergreen plants suitable as a privacy screen:

- Abelia (*Abelia x grandiflora* 'Edward Goucher'), 6 feet
- Compact strawberry bush (*Arbutus unedo* 'Compacta'), 8 feet
- Columnar boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* 'Graham Blandy'), 8 feet
- Red single-flower camellia (*Camellia sasanqua* 'Yuletide'), 10 feet, shade-loving.
- California lilac (*Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* 'Victoria'), 8 feet
- Himalayan cedar (*Cedrus deodara*), 50 feet

- Mexican orange blossom (*Choisya ternata*), 8 feet
- White rock rose (*Cistus corbariensis/hybridus*), 4 feet
- Leyland cypress (*Cupressocyparis leylandii* 'Emerald Isle'), 25 feet
- Pink Princess Escallonia (*Escallonia x exoniensis* 'Fradesii'), 6 feet
- Dragon's head clumping bamboo (*Fargesia dracocephala* 'Rufa'), 10 feet
- Salal (*Gaultheria shallon*), 6 feet
- Convex-leaf Japanese holly (*Ilex crenata* 'Convexa'), 6 feet
- Columnar Japanese holly (*Ilex crenata* 'Sky Pencil'), 8 feet
- Waxleaf privet (*Ligustrum japonicum* 'Texanum'), 10 feet
- Boxleaf honeysuckle (*Lonicera nitida*), 6 feet
- Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora* 'Teddy Bear' or 'Little Gem'), 20 feet to 25 feet
- Pacific wax myrtle (*Myrica californica*), 15 feet
- Delavay osmanthus (*Osmanthus delavayi*), 8 feet
- Lily of the valley shrub (*Pieris japonica* 'Mountain Fire'), 8 feet, shade-loving.
- Schipka cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus* 'Schipkaensis'), 6 feet
- Portugal laurel (*Prunus lusitanica*), 12 feet
- Sweet box (*Sarcococca confusa* or *S. ruscifolia*), 5 feet, shade-loving.
- Columnar English yew (*Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata'), 8 feet
- Upright Japanese yew (*Taxus cuspidata* 'Fastigiata'), 30 feet
- Hybrid Hicks yew (*Taxus x media* 'Hicksii'), 10 feet
- Green giant western arborvitae (*Thuja standishii* x *plicata*), 3 feet
- Emerald green arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Smaragd'), 15 feet
- Evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*), 6 feet
- Spring bouquet viburnum (*Viburnum tinus* 'Compactum'), 6 feet



Left: Native salal (*Gaultheria shallon*) and evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*) combine to create a hedgerow over time in a woodland setting. **Right:** A mature, large-scale privacy screen in a major housing development. *Photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

The following are examples of deciduous plants suitable as a privacy screen or “fillers” for an otherwise evergreen hedge:

- Orange-leaf barberry (*Berberis thunbergii* 'Orange Rocket'), 4-5 feet
- Columnar hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus* 'Frans Fontaine'), 30 feet
- Red- or yellow-twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea*), 6 feet
- Compact burning bush (*Euonymus alatus* 'Compactus'), 8 feet
- Columnar euonymus (*Euonymus japonicus* 'Green spire'), 8 feet
- Rose of Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus* 'Blue Bird'), 8 feet
- Bigleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Nikko Blue'), 6 feet, shade-loving.
- Panicle hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'Limelight'), 8 feet
- Common privet (*Ligustrum vulgare* 'Cheyenne'), 8 feet
- Golden privet (*Ligustrum x vicaryi*), 10 feet
- Tulip-flower magnolia (*Magnolia x soulangiana* 'Black Tulip'), 20 feet
- Ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Coppertina'), 8 feet
- Firethorn (*Pyracantha coccinea* 'Kasan'), 10 feet
- Red flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*), 10 feet
- Black-leaf elderberry (*Sambucus racemosa* 'Black'), 8 feet
- Blue skies lilac (*Syringa vulgaris* 'Monore'), 10 feet
- Golden-variegated weigela (*Weigela florida* 'French lace'), 6 feet

Considerations for the hedge should include not only the growth habits but also the owner’s responsibility in maintaining it. For a formal-looking screen, the hedge may be trained (pruning side and top, as well as thinning) a few times per year. The ideal shape would be wider at base than the top, to allow sunlight to reach the lower leaves.

RESOURCES:

- ***Living Fences: A Gardener’s Guide to Hedges, Vines, and Espaliers.*** Ogden Tanner. Chapters Publishing, 2015.
- ***Landscaping for Privacy: Innovative Ways to Turn Your Outdoor Space into a Peaceful Retreat.*** Mary Wingate. Timber Press, 2011.
- ***Landscaping Principles and Practices.*** 5th edition. Jack E. Ingels, State University of New York, College of Agriculture and Technology. Delmar (Thomson Learning), 1997.