



UNIVERSITY OF
FLORIDA

IFAS EXTENSION

Friday's Feature

Theresa Friday

November 19, 2005

Creating vegetative screens

Our yards are great places to relax and enjoy outdoor activities. And very much like our houses, landscapes typically have walls, or screens, which help to define spaces, frame views, reduce noise and block unwanted sights.

One main purpose for screening is to provide privacy. One may screen a small, intimate area or an entire yard. In addition to screening out neighbors or passers-by, screens can be used as barriers for other people's pets or blocking the view of air conditioners and garbage cans.

Screens can be made from a variety of materials including block, stone, brick, wood or living plants. Fences provide an immediate screen and usually occupy little space. But using plants to create a vegetative screen can offer several advantages.

Vegetative screens can be just as functional as fences but can also provide months and months of flowering beauty. They can also provide lots of greenery which can keep your yard and home shaded and cool during the warm summer months. They can also attract wildlife, becoming a nesting place for birds or a source of food for butterflies and hummingbirds.

It has been estimated that proper use of vegetative screens can reduce the noise level as much as sixty per cent. Plant parts break up sound waves, change their direction, and reduce their intensity. Through judicious use of trees, shrubs and fences, you can reduce the sound of a heavily traveled highway running past your home to the level of a suburban street in the quiet of evening.

But too often when people decide to plant a screen or hedge, they get stuck with the idea that it has to be a monoculture of one type of evergreen shrub such as Leyland cypress, arborvitae or ligustrum. This isn't a bad idea per se, but it can look a little boring when there are so many other options.

A monoculture hedge does have a few problems. What if an insect or disease strikes your hedge? Chances are all of your shrubs will be lost.

The best alternative is to plant a hedge using a variety of large and small shrubs and trees. Generally, something that requires screening will need it the year round, so evergreens naturally predominate in any list of screening plants. But don't be afraid to add a deciduous plant. A few deciduous plants can provide wonderful color, especially in the fall.

When choosing plants for screening, check the available space carefully and know the mature height and width of the plant. Be sure that the plants you choose will fit in the allotted space without undue amounts of maintenance. If you have to frequently prune your plants to keep them in check, it's more than likely you used the wrong plant for that location. Also, when mixing several different types of plants, be sure to choose ones with similar growth requirements.

The choice of plants for a screen is practically unlimited. Flowering shrubs like abelia, azalea, camellia, and oleander can be used effectively. For something a little unusual, add a fruiting plant to your hedge such as blueberry or pineapple guava. For a change in texture, consider adding an ornamental grass. And don't forget the native plants. An upright, female yaupon holly or wax myrtle would make a great addition to any mixed hedge.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.