

## Good Fences Make Good Neighbors

Robert Frost was writing about boundaries between one field and the next that were the result of piling stones cleared for plowing. How hard to move that glacial rubble but how enduring those stone walls. Stones in Tidewater are scarce so we mark our boundaries with hedges more often than fences. Even the fences that kept pets at home have been replaced by a jolt to the dog collar from a buried wire.

White picket fences are so charming they are not expected to do duty to keep anything in or out and open spaces are divided by split rail fences to scenic advantage but for the average homeowner plantings are the solution most often used to contain the scope of one's responsibilities.

When considering hedges we do not have to confine them to edges. They can be placed to outline play areas or to divide a deep narrow lot to improve the proportions. Have you a favorite chair by a front window? And from that window do you see the tops of "foundation planting"? How dull! Ask yourself why you have to go outside to admire that group of plants when if you moved them out 12 or 18 feet as a border for a small garden your view from your chair would be more interesting.

The depth of the garden would depend on the height of your house; the larger dimension more appropriate to a taller home. The pocket garden would be an ideal spot for sheltering tender plants, smaller bulbs whose beauty is best seen up close, a birdbath or small water feature. The surrounding hedge might be evergreens such as hollies. Some are too tall but others, such as *Ilex cornuta carissa*, grow to four or five feet and some are even more ground-hugging. They rarely have the pest or disease problems that beset our beloved boxwood, the historic favorite for edging.

If you have wanted a specimen camellia or a special dogwood but have been reluctant to park one like a flagpole in the front lawn, once you have a low mid-lawn hedge you have a place for it. You can plant it at a corner or at any point mid line. If you wish to plant it at a distance, you could connect it to the hedge with a drift of ground cover roses that are nearly evergreen here.

For a hedge to define a long border a mix of plants is a safer option. We have seen what happens to lovely borders of Bradford pears when one or two were split by windstorms. Leyland cypress was used to create handsome hedges until a vicious fungus turned one or two brown, leaving gaps and the potential for further disease. Any large planting of the same species is an open invitation to the pests and diseases attracted to that choice. By using a variety of shrubs or small trees, you still have a hedge but if one plant dies you are not compelled to find a match to fill the gap.

In planning a hedgerow we never allow sufficient room for the growth that is an addition to what is printed on the tag in the pot. Things get bigger here! Most of us are slow learners of this lesson and need to remember that the blank spaces can be filled with annuals until the shrubs grow. Sometimes you need a shrub to hide what is behind the space near a large tree. *Aucuba japonica* is good for that as it is a dense green or variegated shrub, five to ten feet tall that can be easily kept in check by pruning. Durable, it grows in dense shade.

*Raphiolepis umbellata*, hawthorne, is a late spring bloomer in pink or white against a background of small shiny deep green leaves and rounded growth to about four feet. *Prunus laurocerasus luyken*, the Otto Luyken laurel is another compact evergreen hedge plant with small white candle blooms, deer resistant and tolerates deep shade. A group of dark evergreens can be

lightened and made spritely by the addition of species such as abelia, loropetalum, and spirea with airy foliage and pastel flowers. Azaleas come in whatever size is needed but their rhododendron relatives need more space. Tall rhododendrons are magnificent on rolling acres but in smaller spaces they do not play well with others. The smaller ones do: for example, R. 'Blue Peter' is compact to four or five feet with lovely white blooms with a splash of deep purple.

16 May 13