

ON THE CUTTING HEDGE

BY CHRISTINA PFEIFFER AND WALT BUBELIS



Camellias can provide a colorful alternative to the ubiquitous English laurel hedge.

(Photo by Christina Pfeiffer)



English laurel, a common old-fashioned choice, can become a real “hedge hog,” taking up more space and more maintenance than one may have bargained for.

(Photo by Christina Pfeiffer)

Hedges—kind of old-fashioned, aren’t they? And yet, they offer benefits that keep them in current landscapes. Most frequently, hedges are planted with the desire for a fast-growing screen to provide privacy or to block unsightly views. Fences made from wood or other materials can provide these benefits right off the bat, but as living screens, hedges offer so much more: They provide oxygen, remove pollutants from the air, and enhance our enjoyment of the green world. Hedge plantings can serve as a backdrop for colorful perennials and other garden plants, and contribute to wildlife habitat.

Stroll through an established neighborhood and you’ll see hedges composed of just a few plant species, endlessly repeated. Privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*), English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), and boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*) were favorites in the 1920s through the 1950s. Then came the widespread use of English laurel (*Prunus lauro-cerasus*), Fraser photinia (*Photinia × fraseri*),

and pyramidal arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* var. *pyramidalis*). Throw in Leyland cypress (*Xanthocyparis × leylandii*) and you just about cover the majority of older hedges out there now.

Today, only ‘Pyramidalis’—with its narrow growth habit—continues to be widely planted, along with some newer arborvitae cultivars. Fast growth is a selling point for English laurel and Leyland cypress. Only later do people realize that these trees grow well beyond a convenient size and can become a maintenance headache. Indeed, Leyland cypress—with its large size at maturity, shallow root system, and disease susceptibility—may be the hedge choice that has brought, over time, the greatest regret and caused the most problems, including neighbor disputes about obscured views.

Basic Considerations:

Performance, Aesthetics, Maintenance

So what’s the smarter choice for hedges today? The first step is resisting the urge to use a

SMART CHOICES FOR MODERN-DAY LIVING SCREENS AND FENCES



Boxwood tip blight can be problematic on tightly sheared boxwood.
(Photo by Christina Pfeiffer)



Delavay tea olive (*Osmanthus delavayi*)—combining tiny, dark green leaves and small, fragrant, tubular, white, April flowers—is one alternative to boxwood for a low- to medium-sized sheared hedge. (Photo by Christina Pfeiffer)

fast-growing plant. Choosing moderate- to slow-growing species will pay off in the long run, in terms of performance, aesthetics, and more reasonable maintenance requirements. With a little research and patience, you can plant a serviceable hedge that will be easier to maintain over the long term.

A wider array of shrubs and small tree species is available now than was the case in the past, including columnar and upright selections that offer naturally narrow options for smaller spaces. (See page 19 for our short lists of plants with good potential for training as hedges or screens.) In thinking about a hedge, consider what look or style you want to achieve: formal, semi-formal, or informal/naturalized. Then tie that to the amount of time required to maintain each style type.

Before committing yourself to a plant, consider elements such as pest and disease resistance, attractiveness to wildlife, drought tolerance, light requirements and soil tolerances.

Some cultivars of *Pyracantha*, for instance, are prone to the fungal disease scab, while some spiraeas are susceptible to powdery mildew. Boxwood (*Buxus*), once a very reliable performer for tightly sheared hedges, has become prone to a tip blight (*Calonectria pseudonaviculata*). Fraser photinia no longer holds up to shearing as well as it used to, often dying back; *Photinia* grown to a natural form fares better.

Most hedging plants will do best in sun, given enough water to get established. If they become too shaded, the result will be a rather open look with weak growth that isn't well suited to being sheared or clipped back. Larger-leaved plants will accommodate shade better but will not take well to being sheared; give them more room to look their best. In terms of sustainability, species that will produce new growth from old, bare wood offer the opportunity for future renovation pruning (the alternative being to start over with new plants). Fences, of course, can take any light condition but can also get coated in algae in



Cornus sericea 'Kelseyi' (red-osier dogwood), a native cultivar, grown as an informal low hedge. (Photo by Walt Bubelis)



A mixed border planted with native mountain hemlock (*Tsuga mertensiana*) can provide a screen in about the same or less space than a large English laurel hedge, with minimal to no pruning needed, and the added benefit of wildlife habitat. (Photo by Christina Pfeiffer)

excess shade and be targets of graffiti.

How high should a hedge be? For privacy, a fence is legally limited at a maximum of six feet tall, whereas there is no restriction on a hedge's height beyond what you can manage.

Think Outside the Box(wood)

Hedges need not be all one type of plant or one color. A tapestry hedge of different greens—or a mixture of variegated gold, copper or purple-leaved cultivars—can be striking. Informal hedgerows of multiple species offer food and nesting sites for wildlife, from birds to butterflies. Defensive hedges range from thorn-bearers (e.g. flowering quince, barberries, roses and hollies) to thicket-formers that deter passage when they become wide enough, or when frequently sheared (e.g. ninebarks, shrub dogwoods, and willows).

Before you get stuck in the English laurel aisle at the nursery, consider other broad-leaf evergreens that can do the same job. For example, camellias can be grown as an informal or semi-formal screen and are available in different heights. They also train well in an espalier style for very narrow spaces. A favorite is *Camellia* × *vernalis* 'Yuletide', which has an upright form, blooms in December, and matures around seven feet tall.

Alternatives for boxwood that can tolerate shearing as low formal hedges include

Delavay tea olive (*Osmanthus delavayi*), varieties of Japanese holly (*Ilex crenata*), evergreen azaleas, germander (*Teucrium chamaedrys*), and varieties of *Euonymus japonicus*.

Northwest Native Options

Several Pacific Northwest native plants can translate well to hedges and screens. Mountain hemlock, *Tsuga mertensiana*, has a narrow profile, typically growing about 15 feet wide and about 35 feet tall. Drought-tolerant silktassel (*Garrya* species) can provide a stunning screen with their elegant, draping blooms in winter. They grow to 10 feet tall and wide (sometimes more, depending on the species and cultivar). Use them in a location where there is a lot of width space to allow them to spread out and create an informal screen. *Garrya* species also tolerate hard pruning for training as a semi-formal hedge. Prune them immediately after flowers fade to ensure development of flowers for next year.

California wax myrtle (*Morella californica*) has a somewhat upright growth habit and gets up to between 10 and 12 feet tall. It can be trained as a semi-formal or sheared hedge. For smaller-scale plantings, consider evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*) for a semi-formal or sheared hedge that can be managed as low as three feet tall or as high as between six and eight feet tall.

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Christina's and Walt's Hedge Plant List

Following are short lists of plants with good potential for training as a hedge or screen. Well-stocked nurseries will offer multiple cultivars to choose from. An asterisk next to a plant indicates that it can be kept narrow or already grows that way.

Informal Style

If you match the natural form and size of your plant species to your planting space, then this training style requires little to no annual pruning.

Abelia (*Linnaea*) – offers fragrant, bell-shaped flowers in summer

Camellia – makes for a striking hedge when in flower; hand pruning is best

Ceanothus (California lilac) – colorful, drought tolerant but often short-lived

Chaenomeles (flowering quince) – easiest left informal; it can also be sheared

Cistus (rockrose) – great variety of flowers and foliage; drought tolerant

Elaeagnus (silverberry) – for large-scale plantings; thorny

Laurus nobilis (bay laurel) – for large-scale plantings

Morella (*Myrica*) *californica* (California wax myrtle) – can be trained as informal, semi-formal, or sheared

Pittosporum heterophyllum, *P. tenuifolium* – variegated cultivars provide extra color

Podocarpus macrophyllus var. *maki* (yew pine) – can be informal or kept tight in all light situations

Prumnopitys andina (Chilean plum yew) – turns bronze tones in the winter; can be sheared or grown as an informal hedge

Sarcococca – excellent for shaded sites

Sasa and *Arundinaria* bamboos – smaller-sized ones are useful but best if restrained

Sciadopitys verticillata (umbrella pine) – elegant, soft-looking and soft to the touch; slow-growing

Thuja (arborvitae) – many choices available*

Tsuga mertensiana (mountain hemlock) – PNW native*

Veronica (hebe) – taller forms like *V. salicifolia* and *V. topiaria* can be sheared or left alone

Viburnum – for large-scale hedges

Semi-Formal Style

This style involves some hand pruning to maintain a uniform shape with a soft, natural profile.

Cassinia fulvida – for drought tolerant sites

Corokia cotoneaster (wire netting plant) – very open habit allows light to pass through

Garrya – can be used as informal or semi-formal screen

Hypericum – some shrubby types are excellent for semi-formal hedges

Myrsine africana (African boxwood) – a loose, open style suits this very well*

Myrtus communis (common myrtle)

Osmanthus delavayi (Delavay tea olive)

Vaccinium ovatum – this PNW native is stunning with its new, orange-red growth; can be sheared, or semi-formal*

Formal Style

This training style requires a commitment to regular shearing to maintain uniform dimensions and plant health. The plants listed below tolerate tight shearing. Formally sheared hedges generally require supplemental irrigation, mulch and nutrients, and they may be more susceptible to certain pest issues.

Evergreen azaleas (*Rhododendron*) – shear after bloom period to ensure flowering the following season

Berberis – takes well to shearing or being left alone

Chamaecyparis – many species and cultivars can be very useful in all hedge styles

Cotoneaster – great variety of flowers and foliage; drought tolerant

Escallonia – A hard winter can kill off many varieties, but it still makes a superb hedge

Euonymus japonicus – variegated varieties can spark up an otherwise dull site*

Ilex crenata (Japanese holly) – useful in all training approaches; good boxwood substitute*

Juniperus – many species and cultivars can be very useful in all three hedge styles

Pyracantha (firethorn) – takes well to espaliers; fruit beloved by birds

Spiraea – takes well to any training approach

Taxus (yew) – So very useful as it will respond to heavy pruning; columnar forms available*

Teucrium chamaedrys (germander) – low-growing; was used in monasteries in lieu of boxwood



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RIGHT: A conifer screen planting including incense cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*), mountain hemlock (*Tsuga mertensiana*), Alaska yellow cedar (*Cupressus nootkatensis*), Serbian Spruce (*Picea omorika*), and umbrella pine (*Sciadopitys verticillata*) can be seen along the trail on the east edge of the Arboretum by Crabapple Meadow.



BELOW: Columnar Irish yew, *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata Aurea', in the Witt Winter Garden at the Arboretum. This plant can be trained as an informal, semi-formal, or sheared hedge. It matures to 12 feet tall or more and five feet wide in ten to 20 years. Yews can also be pruned back hard to old wood to renovate overgrown specimens.
(Photos by Christina Pfeiffer)



Selection and Spacing

Look for nursery stock that is well-branched to the ground. Shorter specimens with dense foliage will be easier to train than taller specimens that lack shoot growth near the bottom.

Give careful consideration to spacing—between the plants and the hardscape, as well as between individual plants. Planting too close to pavement edges and walls is a common error that leads to difficulties with maintaining clearance. Planting right up against fences will restrict future access for maintenance, and may impose unwanted plant growth and pruning work on a neighbor.

Spacing plants within the hedge row will depend on the mature spread of the species, how quickly you want coverage, and budget (hedge funds). For example, if you place shrubs that grow up to five feet in diameter two-and-a-half feet apart, you'll create a solid screen faster than if you place them three feet apart. But you'll also need to purchase more plants to grow your hedge.

Place columnar varieties of arborvitae and juniper carefully. Give them the space they need to spread into at maturity, as they won't grow back if cut back to old bare wood. Plus, with their tendency to accumulate dead twigs and leaves on the interior, they can be a hazard in fire-prone areas; planting them a good 30 feet from structures is advised.

Plant for Strong Establishment

One of the best ways to promote strong hedge growth and coverage is to practice good planting techniques. Planting in fall has the advantage

of giving roots a jump start on growth before new shoots appear in spring. Proper root-ball preparation is key to making sure those roots are in direct contact

with garden soil. Before digging the hole, take plants out of their containers, gently loosen tight soil on the sides, and remove any excess soil that may have piled up and buried the stems. Prune out any girdling roots. Ditto with balled-and-burlapped stock. Remove all twine, and cut the burlap away from the sides of the root ball.

Measure the exact height of the root ball, and then excavate a planting hole of the same depth. Planting too deep is a leading cause of future plant failure. Backfill the holes with the existing, un-amended native soil. Apply a coarse, organic mulch—such as shredded leaves or wood chips—that will help conserve soil moisture and slowly release nutrients as it decomposes. Apply the mulch two to four inches deep and make sure it does not bury the stems.

Good aftercare during the first few years is the next step to healthy early growth, no matter which plant species you have installed. Water deeply to moisten the entire depth of the root balls once per week, more often in periods of high heat.



California wax myrtle (*Morella californica*) can be trained as a semi-formal or sheared hedge.

(Photo by Christina Pfeiffer)



A correctly sheared hedge, with sides slanted so that the top is narrower. This allows light to reach the lower branches and prevents the foliage from thinning out.

(Photo by Walt Bubelis)

Pruning and Training

Begin pruning the first year after planting to promote dense branching for formal and semiformal styles. Informal hedges should need little to no pruning—they are maintained with selective pruning to manage any errant shoots, with cuts placed at a point of branch attachment far to the inside of the canopy. Semi-formal hedges are shaped with hand pruners, while formal hedges are trained to precise geometric shapes through regular shearing and require more maintenance than the other styles. Sheared plants have greater irrigation and nutrient needs and can be prone to infestations of sucking insects and some diseases. Choosing species with known tolerance to shearing is essential for successful formal hedges.

Leaf size is also a consideration for the pruning method that you use. Plants with small leaves tend to respond better and look better after shearing than large-leaved selections. Hand-pruning techniques used for semi-formal hedges can help you avoid the unsightly cut edges that occur from shearing large-leaved plants.

To keep semi-formal and formal hedges healthy, remove no more than one-half to one-third of the green shoot length. Slant the sides of the hedge so the top is narrower, allowing light to reach the lower branches and prevent the foliage from thinning out. Keep shears sharp for the cleanest cuts. Scissor-style hedge shears give a cleaner cut than power shears. Power trimmers work faster and are effective for

large-scale hedges with fine-textured foliage.

Prune hedges when new growth is emerging. Avoid hard pruning going into the winter season. Optimal times for training semi-formal and formal hedges is in late winter to early spring. A light summer shearing can be helpful for maintaining size, however, never shear during periods of high heat.

Hedge Renovation

All types of hedges can become overgrown, particularly if they have been neglected. Most conifers cannot be pruned back hard, but species groups that generate new growth on old wood (such as *Taxus*, *Buxus*, *Ilex*, *Prunus*, *Osmanthus*, *Garrya*, *Morella* and *Vaccinium ovatum*) can be renovated with hard pruning in late winter to early spring.

This timing is essential; hard pruning in summer and fall can produce poor results and dieback. To maintain some leaf coverage during renovation, you can do it in stages: Reduce the height and/or width on one half of the hedge the first year, then complete the other half the next year. 🌱

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