

# Try these tips for creating layers of backyard privacy

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Your house may have a beautiful outdoor living space, perfect for quiet morning coffee or fun evening get-togethers. But if adjacent homes loom large, or your home backs up on public land, you can't truly relax until your "al fresco" space becomes a little more private.

It's a particular problem for homeowners in close-in suburbs, where backyards abut and you may as well invite the neighbors to everything you do outside since they're pretty much right there with you anyway. But even spacious yards can feel exposed, with neighboring lots impinging on personal space.

There are many creative fencing and landscape options that can help create a zone of privacy.

"Think 'screening' before throwing up a barrier," says Margie Grace, a landscape designer in Santa Barbara, Calif. "One of my favorite choices is a screen made of steel-wire reinforcing mesh mounted on wood posts. Let the wire rust for a great look, and add lacy vines. You've got a show-stopping art piece, plus the privacy you need."

If you do want a solid barrier, Grace suggests a plastered wall, which can be custom colored, and can look traditional or contemporary.

"Add architectural details such as screen panels or an iron grill; artistic details like tile mosaic, shutters, shadow box or a mural; or a beautiful gate even if it doesn't go anywhere," she says. "These help make the wall welcoming."

Fences can be softened with vines, espaliered plantings and trained ornamentals. Vary the height of plantings and allow them to break the fence's top line.

If a neighbor's house looms over you, Grace suggests creating an outdoor "ceiling" with canopy trees and overhead structures such as pergolas, shade sails and arbors.

With greenery, decide if you need evergreen year-round coverage; if so, avoid deciduous plants. If a crisp formal hedge isn't your style, consider an informal screen of plants, perhaps dual-purpose ones that will also provide fruit, flowers or greens.

Julia Fogg, a landscape designer in East Sussex, England, and author of "Creating Privacy in the Garden," finds hard fence materials to be sterile.

"I prefer the softer look that the Japanese do so well -- interwoven bamboo and willow with tightly bound knotted twigs," she says.

You can solve concerns about fence-height restrictions or neighbor sightlines with double screens, ornamental grasses and slim, tall trees, Fogg says. Place the deck or patio "so you have your back to the problem. Foliage also saps up and absorbs noise," she notes.

Avoid planting greenery that requires a lot of upkeep, the experts say. Before you buy, check with your nursery about pruning, watering, disease resistance and shedding tendencies.

Doug Jimerson, garden content editor for Better Homes & Gardens magazine, likes Emerald Green arborvitae, Gray Gleam juniper and Hick's yew as screening plants for privacy.

Trumpet vines and wisteria are great perennial climbers, but, notes Jimerson, "if you need quick privacy, opt for annual vines that will smother a trellis in just one season. Of course, they won't last over the winter, but this will give you time to get your shrubs in place."

And to deter trespassers, Fogg suggests a mix of pyracantha, evergreen honeysuckle and roses -- thorny alternatives to a "Keep Out" sign.



**GARDEN GATEWAY:** There are many creative fencing and landscape options that can create a privacy zone in your yard. (AP)



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**WROUGHT WITH COLOR:** Fences can be softened with vines, espaliered plantings and trained ornamentals. (AP)