

“Good Fences Make Good Neighbours”

Wide open spaces are surely an American thing; lawn flowing into lawn is not unusual in our neighborhoods, while in England, for example, walls or hedges enclose private spaces. We don't know how Robert Frost felt about fences because the above quotation was in response to: “My apple trees will never get across

And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.”

Tidewater does not have the plentiful stones for mending walls as Frost did in New England but we have lots of plants for hedges

Over the years I have had dozens of good neighbors and never a bad one, and I have had fences, walls, and hedges. Growing up we had low barberry hedges with purposeful gaps toward the back of each thorny length to allow delivery of warm muffins or the return of a cup of flour. *Berberis* is immune to heavy snow and interminable winters. Here they tend to be invasive, especially the *B. thunbergii*, Japanese barberry.

Berberis, a genus with hundreds of species, is found in areas circling the globe and several of the evergreen species have rich shiny foliage, red or purple berries and large yellow or orange flowers and top out at five feet so don't have to be continually trimmed. One, *B. x frikartii* ‘Telstar’ is flat-topped when mature and is a tidy four feet tall.

If you want a truly thorny barrier to keep critters out, shrub roses make good hedges if you have plenty of room and don't mind them being leafless for a few months. Hybrid musks, hybrid *kordesii* and English roses are fine choices as well as being useful as specimen plants. There are attractive smaller sorts for smaller places that are not high maintenance.

As a background for a flower bed or just to enclose a ‘garden room’ or the whole back yard, Yew is best. That is partly opinion of course. Yew, the *Taxus* genus, is broadly rounded and upright, evergreen and coniferous. Their fine dark leaves come on plants of various shapes and sizes but they put up with sea salt, acid and alkaline soils and sun and shade. They also put up with heavy pruning if you're so inclined.

Another evergreen, *Arborvitae*, *Thuja* syn. *Platycladus*, has many cultivars suitable for hedging. *T. occidentalis* (American arborvitae, Eastern arborvitae, White cedar) is a small rounded conical tree with billowy branches. Many of them are trees: others dwarf. ‘Little Gem’ is a dwarf 3 feet and cushion shaped as it spreads to 4 ½ to 6 feet. Its leaves are dark green. Even shorter is ‘*Caespitosa*’, a slow-growing bun-shaped shrub to 12”. It has a soft fluffy look and would be a charming way to edge part of your property.

Ligustrum (privet) is used for hedges but it is not native to this part of the world and it has become so invasive the planting of it is discouraged. It does flower: the blossoms are white panicles with a fragrance reminiscent of old gym socks. Bees love it. There were *ligustrum* shrubs under the windows of Gloucester Intermediate School, before it was Page and before it

was air-conditioned. With the windows open the power of the bees to disrupt the lesson greatly outranked their size and ferocity.

Incidentally, there is no law that says a hedge must be straight or even that it must be comprised of one kind of plant. You can create curved bays of camellias, then a low group of evergreens followed by a triangle of magnolias. Low-growing Mahonias (Oregon grape holly) offer a fine contrast to conifer foliage. In planning plantings keep in mind that repetition of color or shape provides rhythm and movement and that the use of a sudden solitary gold or lime foliated plant will disrupt the harmony unless that surprise is repeated in another part of the garden. Planning also means being a good neighbor. You have to pay attention to the effect your plans have on your neighbor's plans. Don't put in a line of sky-high shrubs that shade his tomato patch.

For ease of maintenance, you can't go wrong with native plants such as Itea (Virginia sweetspire), Callicarpa (Beautyberry), Clethra (Summersweet), Rhus (Sumac), Calycanthus (Sweetshrub, Carolina allspice), Sambucus (elderberry) and a plethora of Spireas. Native plants can fill any requirements for border shrubs and have few requirements of their own.