



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Ideas for privacy: hedges, vines, and bamboo.

A hedge between keeps friendship green. – proverb.

With houses being built cheek by jowl, and remodels going vertical to increase square footage, we get lots of questions about plants for screening and privacy. People are looking for plants that are narrow, fast-growing, evergreen, and low-maintenance. The sun exposure is a significant factor: west-facing walls are extremely hot, north-facing ones get little sunlight.

In short, these can be some of the most challenging environments for plant selection.

The issue: a neighbor's remodel suddenly created a problem view. But the planting site is very narrow.

Solution: bamboo.

Bamboo is ideally suited to screening: fast-growing, narrow and upright with attractive foliage. Plants can double in height each year and reach 15 to 20 feet or more in just a couple of years. Pruning is minimal and litter is light.

The problem with bamboo is that people often plant the wrong kind and they don't restrain it. Bamboo comes in two basic types: clumpers and runners. Clumpers can go in the ground. Runner generally should not.

Clump-forming bamboo can quickly make a very dense privacy screen, essentially a solid mass of culms (the expanded shoots) and foliage. Although they will not spread far, the roots do creep outward and could possibly go under the fence. If you have less than five to six feet of planting space, it's better to constrain them in a large tub or install a barrier.

There are lots of types to choose from; here are three that are hardy and reliable in this area:

- Alphonse Karr hedge bamboo (*Bambusa multiplex* Alphonse Karr). *Bambusa multiplex* types are sometimes called "hedge bamboos" because they have dense foliage and take well to pruning if you're so inclined. This makes a wall of yellowish-green bamboo leaves on thin, golden stems, growing to about 12 to 15 feet tall and arching outward to make graceful clumps.
- Buddha's Belly bamboo (*Bambusa ventricosa*) is much bigger, growing rapidly to 20 feet or more with branches that spread outward. Large glossy dark green leaves, and thick culms up to a couple of inches in diameter. This is the way to screen an ugly view quickly. If you stress it by drought, or seriously restrain the roots, the stems bulge between the nodes to make the "bellies."
- Weaver's bamboo (*Bambusa textilis*) is a very tall bamboo to thirty feet or more that forms a very tight clump. The foliage starts up higher than the others, but the culms are very densely packed, forming a wall of bamboo wood at eye level. This is one of the most attractive large bamboos for our area.



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Some people prefer the elegant see-through look of the running bamboos. The shoots are more widely spaced along the rhizome roots, so the stand is more open. A screen of running bamboo provides less privacy, but is very attractive. Most common are forms of golden bamboo (*P. aurea*) and black bamboo (*P. nigra*), which are named for the color of their stems.

These will spread far and wide when planted in the ground, and barriers only restrain them if they are carefully monitored. Rhizomes run up, over, under, or around barriers, but can be easily cut if they're caught in time. If not, you have to dig them out, and it's arduous. Barriers are made from concrete, or special extra-thick plastic available from bamboo specialists.

A better bet: bamboo grows well in containers, and with regular watering can be readily confined to a large tub or planter for many years. The rhizomes circle the edge, filling the whole thing with stems and roots. Check once a year to make sure they haven't gone over the top. If you use an oak wine barrel, tip it up annually to see that the bottom hasn't rotted out.

A creative way to make a bamboo screen is with galvanized metal livestock watering troughs, available at local feed stores. Remove the drain plug and drill a few more holes in the bottom. Since these are 24" high, the planting is instantly elevated. Fill with good quality potting soil that has some organic fertilizer in it. Run a drip line in and connect it to your regular watering system. Plant two to three plants in each 6-foot long trough, supply with plenty of water and nitrogen, and you will have a screen almost instantly. And there is no chance of the running bamboo "escaping" and invading your yard or your neighbor's.

"We would like something to give us privacy. I was thinking of a trellis with a vine. Do you have recommendations for an evergreen vine that would do well in this environment? Something with flowers would be especially nice."

Vine on a trellis

Vines are the fastest way to get privacy, as most will reach the height of the fence by the end of the first season.

Check with the city building department about extending the height of the fence. Trellis or lattice may be used, attached securely to the top of the fence, to give some privacy directly and provide a structure for the vine.

If you don't have gaps in the fence, you may need to provide something for the vine to twine onto at first. The simplest is to get concrete wire from the lumber yard and attach it to the fence with a slight gap for the vine.

Please choose your vine carefully! Any vine needs to be pruned to confine it to the fence. Some are so vigorous that you and your neighbor may come to regret them, as they need frequent pruning and may root along the ground or spread by suckering. For added color, consider adding some deciduous clematis to mingle with these and provide their spectacular blooms in spring or summer (see separate note about evergreen clematis below).



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- Some fast-growing vines: bower vine (*Pandorea jasminoides*), lilac vine (*Hardenbergia violacea*), white potato vine (*Solanum jasminoides*), star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*), red trumpet vine (*Distictis buccinatoria*).
- Use with caution. These can sucker, or escape along the ground and root as they go: pink jasmine (*Jasminum polyanthum*), passion flower (*Passiflora*). In both cases, the spectacular blossoms may be worth the bit of extra pruning. Lots of passion flower varieties to choose from, but Lavender Lady and Witchcraft are especially heavy bloomers.
- Use only forewarned as to vigor: evergreen clematis (*Clematis armandii*), Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*), Lady Banks rose (*Rosa banksia*).

Shrubs or trees trained as tall hedges.

Many shrubs or small trees can be clipped and shaped for privacy. The faster they grow, the more often you'll need to prune them. The following can be trained in narrow areas, and are all quite drought tolerant once established.

- Fern pine (*Podocarpus gracilior*) is a soft-foliaged tree that can ultimately grow to thirty feet or more if you let it. But with a growth rate of two to three feet a year, it is easily managed by annual pruning, and it can be clipped two-dimensionally to stay within a narrow side yard.
- Shiny xylosma (*Xylosma congestum*) requires more patience, but it can be shaped in any manner you want. The soft bronze new growth in spring is shiny green the rest of the year. Bees love the small flowers. Train it up as a tree, shear it as a hedge, or simply remove individual branches that poke out where you don't want them for a natural look.
- Some other choices include Italian buckthorn (*Rhamnus alternus*), Pineapple guava (*Feijoa sellowiana*). A native shrub that gets big enough to provide privacy, though slower growing, is toyon (*Heteromeles*).

For more options for hedges and screens, see my Enterprise article from March 2006:
http://redwoodbarn.com/DE_hedges.htm



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Planted in 2013, this hedge of the Yellow Groove Bamboo, *Phyllostachys aureosulcata spectabilis*, has grown rapidly to make a tall narrow screen. The see-through effect is very graceful. This variety has green stripes on yellow culms.



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Bambusa textilis, the weaver's bamboo. Though it doesn't spread widely, you can see that this clump-forming bamboo gets quite large!



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Closeup of the spectabilis variety of Yellow Groove Bamboo, *Phyllostachys aureosulcata spectabilis*, showing the striped culms. Bamboo changes subtly through the seasons as the shoots emerge and grow rapidly and the wood ages to different colors.



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White potato vine (*Solanum jasminoides*) is a fast-growing vine that will clamber quickly to the top of a lattice fence extension. It flowers off and on all season. Clip or shear lightly to keep it in bounds.



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Fern pine, *Podocarpus gracilior*, has soft, shiny green foliage. It is a small tree, but annual pruning can keep it as a narrow hedge. Podocarpus tolerates shade or sun.



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Shiny xylosma, *Xylosma congestum*, is a very common choice for hedges. It can be pruned into almost any shape you want. The flowers are not showy, but attract bees. Xylosma is very drought tolerant.



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Foliage of *Xylosma congestum*.