A WORD OR TWO ABOUT GARDENING

There are green alternatives to a chain link fence.

The desire to mark out residential property boundaries is usually driven by a need for security or privacy or both. A chain link fence can provide a degree of security, but by itself affords no privacy. A wooden fence can provide both and can be less of an eyesore. There is a more attractive, green option. Consider shrubs or small trees grown as a hedge or informal screen – the latter can even be the solution to hiding a chain link fence. In addition to meeting the above requirements, a hedge can provide several other benefits. These include acting as a windbreak, muffling outside noise, separating different elements within the landscape (e.g., screen off a patio or pool) and serving to unify yard and residence. A hedge can also attract wildlife, especially birds, providing both food and habitat. Does a hedge seem like a proposition for your yard? Before making tracks to your favorite nursery, do some homework as to which shrubs will best provide the type of hedge you require under your growing conditions. Installing and maintaining a hedge can be a sizeable investment in time. Above all don’t be swayed by a desire to have instant results. If this is of paramount importance choose a fence!

**Formal hedges** are close clipped so that they form a continuous barrier with the outline of the individual shrubs no longer apparent. Densely foliaged shrubs with small leaves that will withstand shearing are most suited for this purpose. In Miami-Dade the choice of such shrubs is very limited. A **semi-formal hedge** has growth that is not as dense and uses larger leaved shrubs and rather than being clipped, individual stems are pruned to maintain size and shape. Flowering shrubs are often used for this purpose. An **informal hedge** or screen consists of a row of similar shrubs that maintain their own distinct outline and require only occasional pruning to ensure each is of similar size and shape. There is far greater choice of plant material for a hedge of this type including large shrubs/small trees used as windbreaks. Before installing a hedge, consult with your neighbor (at a minimum take responsibility for upkeep).

When installing formal or semi-formal hedges, plant spacing depends on the shrubs chosen, though as a rule of thumb a fifth to a quarter of their natural spread is accepted. This usually translates to 1 – 3’ between plants. For a formal hedge allow a depth of up to 3’, more for an informal screen where pruning is far less aggressive. In most instances 3 gallon container plants are adequate - using 7 or 10 g size plants will significantly increase the cost. The larger size plants may be warranted for a wind break where tall shrubs/small trees are used and spacing is not as close. For every 10 plants estimated, purchase two extra as replacements for those that fail to thrive.

Apart from form, function and style of hedge, there are two overriding factors that must be considered first - soil conditions and shade. While it is usually sufficient to use the soil you removed from the planting hole as backfill (with up to 10% added organic material), some shrubs benefit from a more enriched soil (e.g., ixoras, roses and Hibiscus). A few, such as Pittosprum, sea lavender (Argusia gnaphalodes) and
coast silver oak (*Brachylaena discolor*) prefer fast draining sandy soil and are especially suited to coastal situations. Where shade is a factor consider marlberry (*Ardisia escallonioides*), a stopper such as *Eugenia confusa* or one of the polycsias (aralias).

For a formal or semi-formal hedge prepare the strip of ground where the hedge is to be installed by first removing grass and weeds. The area cleared should be up to 3’ wide plus a 6 – 12” border between the projected base of the hedge and adjacent turf grass. The border can be kept mulched or used for low growing bedding plants or a non-invasive groundcover. Planting holes should have sloping sides and be spaced at intervals appropriate for the shrubs that will make up the hedge. For an informal hedge/screen there is no need to clear a strip of ground, just dig holes at regular intervals (usually 3-4’). The screen will filter out more light as it grows, especially the north side of one placed east to west. Mulch the area and/or replace thinning turf grass with a shade tolerant ground cover.

Once installed, pay particular attention to training the shrubs that will form your hedge. Cut back lateral stems (up to 6”) to induce denser growth. Do not remove top growth until the hedge reaches its’ requisite height. For formal or semi-formal hedges higher than 3’ the sides should taper in from the base so that the top is slightly narrower. By maximizing the amount of light reaching the bottom of the hedge, new growth is stimulated preventing the base from thinning out. On attaining the desired height the top of the hedge can now be cut flat or rounded (domed or more cuspidate). For a professional finish string a guide line at the desired height between to stakes to ensure a level top. A square or rounded (inverted U) plywood template can be placed across the top of the hedge to act as guide. Above all use sharp hedge clippers to avoid stems with ragged cut ends.

Once established a hedge must be routinely cut to maintain the desired height, width and taper. A formal hedge should always be clipped before new growth hardens (while it is still green). A semi-formal hedge, especially one grown for its flower display, should not be sheared but individual stems hand pruned from within the hedge. Frequent pruning will severely limit flowering. While this can detract from the impact of Ixora or Duranta, it is less important for orange jasmine (*Murraya paniculata*) and Surinam cherry (*Eugenia uniflora*) with less showy flowers – these can even be clipped as a formal hedge. Cutting back individual stems is also advisable for hedges made up of large leaved shrubs. Fortunately not now as common, hedges made up of seagrapes were for a time quite common. Clipped they were most unattractive, their leaves ragged and torn. The same untidy fate has also been observed where Hibiscus is used as a close clipped hedge.

If regular pruning is neglected and the hedge is now too tall, it should be cut back 6 – 12” below the desired height. To restore an overgrown hedge that is too wide cut back hard, one side at a time allowing sufficient time between pruning to permit new growth to become well established. Do not perform all of this heavy pruning at once as this will cause severe stress.

Provide fertilizer, preferably a slow release formulation such as a complete palm special, twice a year (March and September). For some shrubs you will need to correct for trace element deficiencies. On local high pH limestone soils this is a
common problem with ixora, which can become most unattractive, appearing
scrawny, the foliage pale yellow to bleached with necrotic spots. Apply chelated
iron as a soil drench (containing Fe-EDDHA as chelate) twice between late spring
and early fall as well as 3-4 applications of a trace element foliar spray that includes
manganese. For any hedge, position sprinklers so that the base is not repeatedly
soaked. This can encourage disease leading to die back and root rots.

Space permits only a brief review of locally available shrubs suitable for use in a
hedge. For a formal clipped hedge there is unfortunately limited choice. Surinam
cherry and orange jasmine are both widely used for this purpose. Both produce
large amounts of messy fruit leading to numerous seedlings in the landscape (this
weedy tendency is why they are controlled near native plant communities). If
regularly clipped, fruit production should be negligible. A further problem with
orange jasmine concerns uncertainties as to future availability. This is due to
restrictions in force resulting from its’ role as host for the psyllid (small sap feeding
insect) that vectors citrus greening, a serious bacterial disease of citrus.

There is of course ficus (usually Ficus benjamina), a leading choice for sheared
hedges in Miami-Dade, being fast growing, amenable to close clipping and
producing a dense attractive screen. However you should think seriously before
installing a ficus hedge. There are some well known drawbacks of which the
absolute necessity for frequent pruning is paramount – 6’ should be the maximum
height for a ficus hedge. This is essential not only to contain vigorous top growth
but to restrict the spread of the highly invasive root system. If you cannot afford the
time/money to keep a ficus hedge clipped to this height (in summer this can mean
pruning at least twice a month), choose an alternative. If you are at an age when
yard maintenance chores are becoming more onerous, decide whether you can
afford to hire a competent person to keep the hedge within bounds. Neglected, a
ficus hedge rapidly becomes a behemoth as the individual plants try to develop into
the large tropical trees nature intended, difficult and expensive to remove. Thrips
can seriously disfigure new growth, though it is more common for hedges made up
of Ficus microcarpa (Cuban laurel).

Understand that ficus is not a dirty word – the fault lies with the inappropriate
outdoor use of species that develop into very large trees. Consider Ficus microcarpa
var. crassifolia, slow growing to 6’ with mounding growth, it forms a very attractive
screen that can be maintained with minimal pruning. The related, more common
Ficus ‘Green Island’ is more inclined to grow as a low spreading shrub but with
some pruning can be encouraged to grow as a neat low hedge.

If you must have a fast growing screen, and don’t mind coarse foliage, consider
both Acalypha hispida (chenille plant) and the related A. wilkesiana (copperleaf).
These will produce a 6-8’ screen, though if using copperleaf choose a cultivar such
as ‘Godseffiana’ or Hoffmannii with white/yellow and green variegated foliage. Those
with bronze/red foliage are best used as single specimen shrubs, overwhelming the
landscape when used en masse. Neither of these shrubs, are drought tolerant,
copperleaf in particular needs regular water to prevent wilting.

Podocarpus macrophyllus (yew podocarpus) is a slow growing 40-50’ evergreen
tree that branches low to the ground and produces leathery lance shaped leaves. It
has found extensive use as a semi-formal hedge (best appearance if hand pruned) admired for the dark green foliage and dense growth, producing a hedge with a soft pleasing outline. An added advantage, Podocarpus has non-invasive roots so it can be planted close to a sidewalk, and appears to resist wind damage. It will grow on a range of moist but free draining soils, preferring those that are slightly acidic. Organic mulch is beneficial, both conserving soil moisture and slowly enriching the soil. Apply a complete fertilizer containing at least 4% magnesium 2-3x per year for a total of 3-4 lbs per individual plant. Podocarpus is especially prone to develop magnesium deficiency symptoms (seen as a broad yellow band across the middle of the leaf). Iron deficiency may also develop on local calcarious soils.

**Pittosporum tobira** (variegated and all green cultivars) will quickly produce an attractive semi-formal hedge, and is especially useful in coastal locations. It must be provided with perfect drainage, being very susceptible to root rots. If you are not sure, plant on a berm. Added to this several leaf spotting diseases can cause leaf drop, it is susceptible to trace element deficiencies on our local high pH soils and is regarded as potentially invasive. **Privet** can be used as a formal hedge, though choose **Ligustrum japonicum** as L. sinense and L. lucidum can be invasive. A drawback – the plant can act as a magnet in attracting scales/whitefly and associated sooty mold. Not as familiar, native Florida privet, **Forestiera segregata** is a far better choice, relatively pest free and not invasive. For a low hedge (4’) the more compact cv. ‘Pineland’ with smaller leaves is an excellent choice.

Of the other native species used as hedge material, **red tip coccoplum** is frequently seen in Miami-Dade as a 3-4’ sheared box hedge. Although stems branch infrequently, there is constant year round leaf renewal ensuring a dense growth habit. The leathery rounded leaves (up to 3 x 1 1/2”) are really too large and stiff for a formally sheared hedge, and as a result often appear tattered. Red tip coccoplum appears far more attractive if allowed to grow as an 8 – 10’ informal screen, with occasional hand pruning as necessary, when both the foliage and attractive (edible) fruits can be fully appreciated. One potential drawback, coccoplum is one of a number of native plants that is host to lac scale, a relatively recent introduced insect pest. The less common, low growing cv. ‘Horizontal’ is a salt tolerant coastal form of coccoplum (height 3-4’) that is easier to maintain as a short hedge. Although coccoplum will take some shade, growth is denser in full sun and is preferable when it is used as a hedge.

The same is true of both green and silver buttonwood, another Florida native sometimes grown as a hedge. **Buttonwood** hedges often loose density at the base due to insufficient light (and misplaced sprinklers). This detracts from what can otherwise be an attractive hedge, and an especially good choice for coastal properties. Buttonwood experiences a prolonged period of winter dormancy during which there is little leaf renewal. If installing green buttonwood, look for the cv. ‘Momba’ with especially vigorous dense growth. For a low maintenance, medium to tall screen the **native stoppers** (small trees/large shrubs) are an excellent choice, accepting full sun or partial shade (growth denser in full sun). These are slow growing but your patience will be rewarded as they grow into a major landscape asset. All have outstanding glossy foliage, new growth often tinged red to pink, and
often colorful fruit. Look for various species of native eugenias, though *E. axillaris* is best avoided for the leaves skunk like odor. The related *spicewood, Calyptranthes pallens* will withstand close clipping and has the added benefit of pleasantly fragrant foliage.

If security is a top priority there are several shrubs that come armed with prickles or spines. For a living barbed wire fence look no further than *cat’s claw (Pithecellobium unguis cati)* a native multi-stemmed shrub/small tree that is well suited to open sites with dry sandy or rocky soil. Avoid the weedy non-native *P. dulce.* Cat's claw has a pair of sharp spines at the base of each bifoliolate leaf, insignificant flowers but the coiled pods are colorful once they split revealing small shiny black seeds embedded in a red aril. Maintenance is minimal, and cat’s claw is easily pruned to form a hedge – just be careful of those spines! Of more ornamental value, *Bougainvillea glabra* grows as an 8-10’ shrub and has a more compact habit than the sprawling *B. spectabilis*, forming a dense impenetrable hedge. Remove long wayward shoots as they appear then prune as necessary to shape. If you wish to maximize flowering curtail pruning in early October (flowers form on new growth in response to shortening day length and dry soil).

*Carissa macrocarpa* is a closely branching 5-10’ shrub with thick glossy ovate leaves, bifurcate spines and attractive jasmine-like flowers that withstands close clipping as a rounded hedge. It performs well in full sun to partial shade, is highly salt and drought tolerant and should be used more in local landscapes – it was once far more commonly seen. Less spiny, the familiar golden *dewdrop (Duranta repens)*, a multi-stemmed shrub, bears intermittent spines and sprays of blue flowers. Cutting back the long stems will make for a more bushy appearance. This however detracts from its’ natural graceful habit, and it is better left uncut and used to form a tall informal screen – remove entire stems to ground level to restrict spread and prune out fruits as they set (poisonous and a source of seedling volunteers).

I will close with *Rondeletia leucophylla*, a personal favorite that makes a light to medium density flowering screen well suited to Miami-Dade limestone. It is related to the familiar pentas (the rosy pink inflorescence is similar), but grows locally as a woody 8-10’ shrub (not 5’ as stated in certain plant guides). Apart from the showy winter to spring flowers, the larger limbs have attractively furrowed bark. New growth is willowy with narrow 4-5” lance shaped leaves with silvery underside. For a medium density screen, place shrubs at 3’ intervals in full sun. Prune out spent flowers to extend blooming, and then cut back as needed in late spring to maintain desired size. Katrina landed a tree on top of my Rondeletia screen so it is currently in recovery mode, but flowering on cue as it should at this time of year.

John McLaughlin

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