

“Secret Gardens: Landscapers Use Plants To Create Privacy”

By Barbara Boughton

When Jim and Ann McMasters moved into their home in Walnut Creek 13 years ago, it was just like every other track home in the new subdivision. The back yard had three-foot-tall weeds and no trees to block the view of nearby houses. “We were closed in by the other houses on either side of us,” says Ann, a homemaker. Simply put, the McMasters and their two children had a privacy problem.

A year later the couple hired San Francisco landscape designer **Kathryn Mathewson** to transform their back yard into a densely planted refuge. Now, thick Black Pittosporum shrubbery encircles the entire yard, with trees such as the slender contrast. Rosemary bushes, columbines and forget-me-nots surround a central black-bottom pool. A stairway leads to the upper level of the sloping 6,000 square-foot garden. It has tall shrubbery, a mimosa and a pistachio tree, a pond and a waterfall trickles down to the lower-level pool.

“When we are here by the pool at night, with the plants surrounding us, I feel like we’re in a Hawaiian lagoon,” says Jim, a commercial real estate broker. “The whole garden is very sheltered, and no one can look in.”

In an era of high-priced, closely spaced houses, outdoor privacy is highly valued. Greenery is one of the wisest ways to create a private feeling: It lets in light or perhaps a filtered view of the bay, while shielding occupants from prying eyes.

“When most people ask me to do a yard, they say they want something that’s personal, where they can feel relaxed and hidden from view” **Mathewson** says. “They want a place that’s truly their secret garden.”

To create a dense plant barrier that isn’t overpowering, most designers recommend tall narrow shrubs such as Italian buckhorn, which can reach 20 feet. The Black Pittosporum is another good choice; it’s a darkly pretty, fast-growing tree that will add three feet in a year in loamy soil. The Carolina cherry is also dense and narrow and has an added plus; fruit and flowers for birds. These shrubs run about \$30 for a five-gallon pot.

Choose plants best suited for your space, says David Franklin, landscape design at Renaissance Gardens in Mill Valley. Some shrubs like a southern exposure, with a lot of sun. Some, such as the Carolina cherry, are eschewed by deer. Others, such as the Pittosporum, grow well on windy hillsides and in partial shade or sun.

Hedges will need pruning, so select plants that don’t grow quickly, such as the Monterey cypress. Trees in the privet family, however, prune easily. Plant the shrubs about 2 ½ feet apart in holes about twice as big as the root ball, **Mathewson** says. This gives the root space to expand and encourages leafy growth. If you have a clay soil, drill tiny holes in the bottom of the planting hole and pack in organic compost. Shrubs do best if watered deeply; about three times a week for an hour when they’re young. Their water needs decrease as they grow. Fertilize with three to five time-release tablets at planting

and use three to four inches of shredded redwood mulch to snuff out weeds and hold in moisture.

Structures for Vines

Perimeter plants, however, are just part of the picture. **Mathewson** suggests varying shrubs with trees and plants of different textures and leaf sizes for variety in front of the perimeter plants. And for a romantic touch, try climbing vines, which cost from \$6 to \$25. These can be attached to lattices or fences, pergolas, arbors or trellises.

The arbor in the McMaster's' upper-level garden provides a pretty, old-fashioned look. The 10-foot-high wooden arbor is covered with jasmine, clematis and English roses. And since it's right outside the master bedroom, it provides privacy as well.

Arbors are shelters that come in all shapes and sizes. Pergolas are similar to arbors, but more substantial. Trellises are usually arched or flat panels in front of a gate or fence. Lattices, often built with diamond shapes, can also be attached to a fence. Small-prefabricated lattices or trellises sell for less than \$100.

Climbing vines can even be attached to a fence with vine wire, but many people prefer a trellis or arbor. "They give form and structure to a garden," says Oakland landscape designer Wendy Wilde. She recommends vigorous vines such as trumpet, wisteria and clematis, but she cautions consumers to make sure that structures are sturdy enough to support the vine weight.

Always plant vines in the ground, not in pots, because they need deep roots to grow tall, and fertilizer with a time-release variety twice a year. Ask your nurseryman about your vines' watering needs; most varieties don't need a whole lot. Vine-covered latticed screen can be used to create separate rooms in your garden or hide hot tub or pool machinery from view. You can buy freestanding trellised or lattice-wood screen sets, about 9 by 6 feet, for about \$500.

Espaliered Trees

Screens, trellises and arbors also make good support for espaliered trees- trees trained to grow flat against a wall or divider. Pruned into interesting shapes, these trees provide elegant silhouettes in a garden. They must be secured to a lattice or wall, however, or sometimes need to be tied to wire strung between posts.

Fruiting, espaliered trees, including pears, quince and apples, are a centuries-old tradition in Europe, where farmers tried to achieve maximum yield in minimum space. But other kinds of trees and plants also can be espaliered. The trees are grown in various shapes, including simple fans and the elaborate Belgian fence-five or more v-shape espaliers, graft a young, potentially full-size tree into the roots of a dwarfed one. This keeps the tree under five feet but produces a lot of fruit. "A normal espaliered fruit tree will produce 50 to 60 pounds of fruit a year", says John Hooper of Sonoma Antique Apple Nursery and

Arbor and Espalier, nurseries with outlets in San Francisco and Healdsburg. Care varies according to tree type. Some of the fruiting varieties suitable for the Bay Area include European and Asian pears, figs, plums, persimmons and guavas. They range from \$100 to \$165, depending on maturity and shape of the tree.

Fences and walls are time-honored ways of obtaining privacy. Redwood fences are the most popular in California because the wood is available and handsome, and doesn't rot. The fence cost about \$20 per foot. Stucco-covered concrete walls are also popular, but these run from \$50 to \$60 per foot. Most city regulations limit fence heights to six feet, but many people get additional height by topping wooden fences with an open lattice.

The trick to making a wall work, says landscape contractor Ray Mosby of Earth Lines in Oakland, is to create a mood using natural woods or stucco, as well as nearby plants. In one garden Mosby designed, he built a concrete fence and covered it with pink stucco to echo the house's Mediterranean look. Plantings fronting the fence include Mayten and Boxwood.

Be imaginative when fronting your wall with shrubbery or covering it with flowering vines. "With the right choices, you can create the feeling of being in a room of greenery, not just in front of a fence," says Wilde.

The project need not be expensive. Although a professionally designed stucco-walled garden with a large number of plantings can run \$30,000 or more, some gardens can be made private for less than \$1000. That amount of money can purchase some fencing, some trees and shrubbery, and a simple trellis or arbor.

When David Kerchman of Oakland decided he wanted to create a visual barrier between his house and his neighbors, he spent \$800 for a redwood and copper pipe fence. The latticed fence fronts a grove of bamboo trees whose leaves spill through. Kerchman designed the fence and hired a landscape developer to build it. "It has a kind of open, Zen feeling, with the bamboo leaves spilling over the fence," he says. "And the fence, as well as letting my children (ages 6 months and 5) play without being disturbed, is a beautiful addition to the garden."

Create a Private Yard in Front

Privacy is not limited to the backyard garden. With a few plantings and some imagination, you can also achieve privacy in your front yard. Most cities allow you to put up a three foot-tall fence in your front yard, which when combined with small shrubs, can provide filtered privacy. (The usual limit for side and back fencing is six feet tall, unless you have a permit.)

Kathryn Mathewson, landscape designer and owner of **Secret Gardens** in San Francisco, suggests letting climbing roses or vines cover the fence. "It won't screen out everything, but it will improve your view so that you block out the asphalt and the cars," she says.

When Sharon Sofla, as art director and copywriter, put up low stucco walls around her home in Oakland, landscape contractor Ray Moshy made the walls hollow so they could serve as planters. They are filled with grasses and flowering plants. “Now the dogs don’t jump in, and my children (ages 5 and 2) are safe because they don’t wander out,” she says. Other techniques for filtered privacy include planting huge trees, such as the Ondon Sycamore, which can grow 75 to 100 feet tall, in front of your windows. Surround them with under story trees such as the native dogwood or Crab Apple, which grow to about 15 feet.

For total privacy, **Mathewson** recommends hedges that can grow six feet and taller. “Most cities allow this type of hedge,” she says. Many people who choose this approach don’t even have to use drapes or blinds to shield their home from onlookers, and they can keep their windows open at night. “With this kind of total privacy, you can light up the garden at night, and it’s like having a live sculpture outdoors. And since you can keep the windows open, you can really bring the outdoors into the house at night. Lighting up the front yard in a garden shielded by shrubbery makes the home feel like a fantasy, and it’s better than any pictures on the wall,” **Mathewson** says.

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