

The Secret Garden

Plants as a Natural Privacy Screen



by **Ken Lain**
the Mountain Gardener

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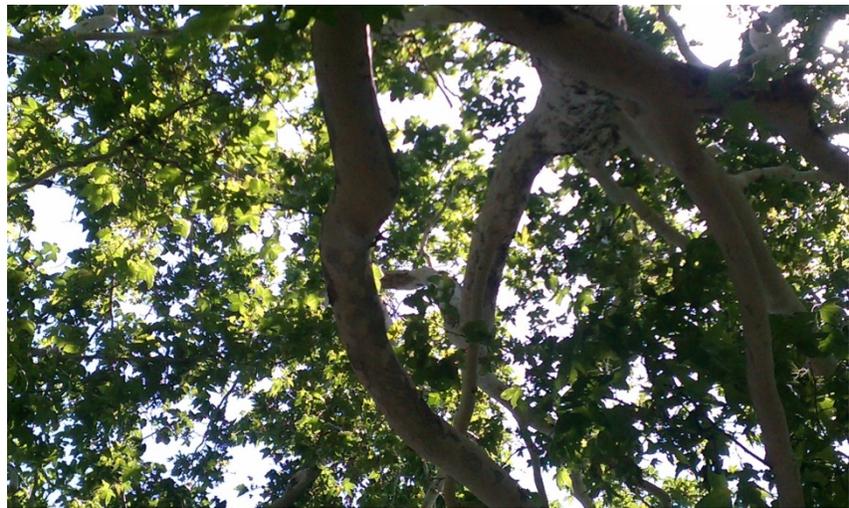
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Introduction

Summer weather has returned in all its mountain glory and we gardeners are back to the great out-of-doors! Besides “working in the dirt,” there are the many pleasures of outdoor living. It’s interesting that enjoyment of “wide-open” vistas from our patios and decks can be enhanced by a certain degree of privacy. If your landscape needs a privacy screen, this might be your year to get one started.

Team members at Watters Garden Center spend more time with clients on privacy screens than any other landscape objective. It is a topic more popular than animal-proof plants or container garden combos. You have many options for creating a living privacy screen that will please you practically and aesthetically:

- Shrubs and hedges
- Evergreen trees
- Deciduous trees
- Fast-growing vines



The type of plants you choose as your privacy screen will depend on the immediacy of your need for privacy and the size and style of your landscape.

Throughout this guide, you will learn proper planting techniques, watering and pruning best practices, and about many varieties of trees, shrubs, and vines to get the perfect privacy screen for your landscape.

How to Choose What to Plant

When you've decided that you want a natural privacy screen, you then have to answer a few questions:

1. What is the ultimate goal of my screen?
2. How tall do I want it to be?
3. How thick do I want it to be?
4. What aesthetics am I looking for?
5. What is the cost?



What is the ultimate goal?

There are many reasons people want a privacy screen. Some people want to keep prying neighbors' eyes out of the yard. Others want to protect their garden from casual short-cutters and opportunistic animals.

Anything with prickly leaves or thorns can serve this purpose, but if you're looking to redirect kids, do consider safety issues. Holly trees and bushes are a good choice in these situations, as well, since they're both nice to look at and not-so-nice to touch. If you're hoping to protect a large window, thorny climbing roses will offer privacy without completely obstructing the view. And since no one should be hovering right next to your window, you don't have to worry about casual passersby injuring themselves on the thorns.

Knowing what the goal of your project is will help you in deciding what kinds of plants to get.



How tall do I want it to be?

If you're trying to keep rabbits out of your vegetable garden, you don't necessarily need a high fence, just one thick enough to keep them from easily coming through. However, if you want to block the new parking lot that's being built down the road, you may want something with a little height.

When you're considering height, don't only think about what you want to block, but what views you want to maintain. If you live on a hill and want to screen out the neighbors down the hill a ways, make sure you don't grow a wall of evergreens so high that it blocks the rest of the landscape!

How thick do I want it to be?

Thickness and height go hand in hand. Do you want to cover the view of your window from your neighbor, or do you want to create a house-length barrier? In the case of a poorly-placed window, a single tree might do the trick, whereas you'd want something thicker to provide a full screen.



Mountain Gardener Tip: *I train our staff to plan for screens for immediate privacy. If you are in need of instant privacy, I recommend putting money into some large specimen plants and filling in the gaps with slower-growing shrubs.*

We use smaller sized, less expensive plants to fill in the peripheral portions of the screen, which will grow to provide total coverage in a few seasons. This practical design idea provides instant privacy from a neighbor's deck or windows, but it also stretches your landscape budget.

What aesthetics am I looking for?

You may not be able to achieve the impressive alleys created by live oaks on many Southern plantations, but that doesn't mean you can't create a natural fence that is as much about form as it is about function. Flowering hedges offer gorgeous color during blooming season, and some, like rose hedges, toe the line between privacy, protection, and aesthetics.



Think about what other plants you have in your landscape and what views you want to maintain after the screen grows in. Make sure the plant(s) you choose blend in well with your yard and beyond.

What is the cost?

The cost depends on many factors: how much area you want to cover, how tall you want the wall to be, and how immediate the need is.

If you have the patience and the time to allow younger plants to grow tall, you will save significant money over buying mature trees. You can also buy a few larger, more expensive plants and fill in the gaps with smaller, cheaper plants. If you have a budget in mind, it will be easier to narrow down your options.



Get expert help from your trusted garden center

Once you've answered these questions, you're ready to choose your plants! These will be your guidelines as you work with a trained garden professional to decide the right plant choice for you. With this information and considering what grows well in the area, they can narrow down the choices to help you find the perfect natural screen for your home.

Planting and Care

Now that you've got your plants and have a plan, it's time to plant. You'll likely have gotten some good tips from the gardening expert, but also take a look at [Watters' Planting Guide That Works](#). While this is a good general guide, planting a privacy screen requires slightly different specifications.

In planting your screen, ignore most growers' spacing requirements for hedges and screens.

When the tag on the plant says it grows 10' wide, bear in mind that that will be your widest spacing. The branch structure should overlap at least six feet off the ground. Space plants 25% closer than recommended for their mature size. This ensures a quick screen that grows thick and full.

Proper watering can be the hardest part of growing plants. New plants need more water than more mature plants, in order to root well.

Use this table as a guide for watering.

Time since planting	Up to 1 year	Beyond 1 year	Winter (Dec – Mar)
Plant Size	Water plant 2 times per week	Water plant 1 time per week	Water plant 2 times per month
1 gallon size	2 gallons	4 gallons	5 gallons
2 gallon size	4 gallons	5 gallons	5 gallons
5 gallon size	5 gallons	10 gallons	10 gallons
7-10 gallon size	7-10 gallons	15 gallons	15 gallons
15 gallon size	15 gallons	20 gallons	20 gallons
24" box	24 gallons	30 gallons	30 gallons

If you own an automatic drip irrigation system, it won't be sufficient for a newly planted plant. Water new plants with a hose or by hand for at least one month (2 months in the summer).

Pruning

When it comes to pruning, one method does not fit all. Each plant has its own pruning requirements, timing, and technique. Many plants prefer to be pruned during the winter or spring, when temperatures are cool and the soil has increased moisture. There are times when you just have to prune in the heat of summer.

Examples of much needed pruning in summer are: Hedges grow too tall and look overgrown and shaggy; tree limbs on weeping species touch the ground, which invites insects and promotes disease; landscapes grow too close to the house causing damage during high winds and channel moisture to your siding; bushy shrubs and trees block sunlight and your beautiful view.

Do's and Don'ts to Summer Pruning:

Don't...

- Prune during drought and heat waves, which will cause increased stress on trees and shrubs. Wait until temperatures moderate, or for the cooling shade of cloud cover.
- Prune during rain showers, marking you as a human lightning rod.

Do...

- Let landscaping dry out for a day or two before pruning. This also avoids the spread of fungus and plant diseases.
- Remove cross branches that prevent sunlight from reaching the inside of trees. This technique increases air flow, thereby decreasing insect and disease infestations in fruit trees, roses and shrubs.
- Pinch off the new candle growth of evergreens to keep them down to a manageable size.

Summer is a good time to prune dead or diseased limbs and branches. Dispose of these infected limbs in plastic bags or burn immediately. Many perennials will bloom again when spent flowers are plucked from the plant.

Mountain Gardener Tip: Clear dead flowers two weeks prior to a major party or wedding; many flowers will be in full bloom just in time for the festivities, especially summer and fall events.



Keep your summer tools clean

Diseases spread easily in summer. When pruning stressed and infected plants, dip pruning tools in bleach water. The disinfecting power of bleach prevents spread and even helps clean plants of further disease. Disinfecting formula = 1 part bleach for every 10 parts of water.

Pruning Paint is a black tar-type material that acts like a botanical bandage on plants. Seal each cut that is larger than a pencil. This seals sap in and prevent insects from burrowing into the exposed pruning cut.

Tools of the trade

Make sure tools feel naturally good in your hand and don't pinch the skin between cuts.



Snips: Small shears for cutting spent flowers on perennials and annuals like dahlia and small roses.



Pruning shears (secateurs): Hand shears for taming roses and grooming small branches on shrubs. Quality is most important when choosing these tools. Look for brands noted to hold their edge and stay sharp.



Hedge trimmers: come in manual varieties, gas powered trimmers like the professionals use, and electric power. Many of the newer battery-operated trimmers work quite nicely as well.



Lopping shears: Have short, thick blades and long handles for cutting larger branches.



Pruning saw: Bowed saw for cutting branches, some have extendable handles for reaching high into trees.

Each plant has its own particular pruning requirements; make sure you get the right tool for the job.

Privacy Screen Plant Guide

The rest of this book is dedicated to the various types of plants that grow well in the Mountain Southwest and make functional and beautiful privacy screens.

Shrubs and Hedges

There are so many possibilities of beautiful, lush shrubs and hedges that it was hard to narrow it down for this guide. The following were chosen for their vibrant colors, easy maintenance, and low water impact.

Pyracantha is the old-fashioned favorite. This 12' tall shrub has everything: beautiful spring blooms, robust green leaves during summer, bright orange berries in autumn, and is a beautiful winter evergreen. Birds love it and it only uses moderate to low water consumption. It can be trained into a formal hedge or let go to provide a more natural look. However, it has lost favor over the years because of its thorns.

Red-tipped photinia is a hedge that stands out with brilliant red growth in spring and an impenetrable wall of green the rest of the year. Glossy leaves reduce moisture loss from the plant and makes this a moderate water user that is fast growing.



Red Clusterberry Cotoneaster outdoes all other screen plants. This evergreen shrub grows 10-15 feet tall and half as wide. Bouquets of white flowers form in the spring and eventually form clusters of red berries throughout winter, which give it its name. A five-gallon size cotoneaster planted now can easily grow to be six feet tall by this time next year.

Mountain Gardener Tip: *I planted these cotoneasters to hide a propane tank and within a season a huge 500-gallon tank had disappeared from view!*



Glossy Privet has the same look as the photinia but may be a better choice for a residential landscape. Growing to only six feet high, it forms a thick dark green hedge. The waxy leaves retain moisture within the plant's structure so that the result is a lower maintenance hedge with lower water needs and fewer bug problems than its red-tipped counterpart.

Golden Euonymus is the most popular of the hedge plants. Although its year-round bright gold foliage appears festive, this plant is as tough as they come. An ideal hedge, it can be sheared or left to grow into a natural form dense enough to make a good visual and sound barrier. Look to the Silver King euonymus for the same design elements but in a silver cream color that is equally striking. For long hedgerows, a combination of the two varieties creates a more interesting view.



Gilt Edge Silverberry is a new hedge plant with a native twist that rivals the manzanita. Bright gold edges highlight each bright blue leaf for a truly striking hedge. Planted at four-foot intervals, it will grow into a head high privacy screen so thick that trespassers wouldn't even try to penetrate it. Investment property owners use this plant because it classes up a property's value but is hardy enough to withstand damage from the most abusive tenant.

Mint Julep Juniper is the super hardy plant your grandfather used as a hedge, but with a more attractive color. The signature sea foam green foliage grows quickly to head high with little help and even less water. It forms a very thick hedge that requires infrequent trimming to keep it perfectly manicured. As northern Arizona is famous for its junipers, a juniper hedge blends right into the landscape.



Oregon Grape Holly has several varieties that grow wild in the mountains of Arizona. With minimal domesticating care, it can quickly grow to a height of six feet. Once up to size, this hedge can be cut off from all care except for very infrequent watering during the heat of summer. Lemon-colored flowers cover this plant in spring followed by a grape-like berry that birds really enjoy. The leaves resemble English holly but are well adapted to our wind and bright sun.

Pinyon Pine grows wild throughout Northern Arizona. The branches spread and then sweep upward to create a bushy, rounded evergreen with short blue-green needles. Locally preferred for screening and as an accent tree where more character is needed, it is a popular choice for planting in small spaces. It readily tolerates poor soil, hot and sunny areas, as well as harsh dry weather conditions.

Edible Hedges

A standard fruit tree can grow to a height of 30 feet; that is a huge plant! Fortunately, alternatives exist to these fruiting giants. Although a semi-dwarf tree is a mere 18-20 feet tall, that still is pretty tall. Even a genetic dwarf, the shortest of all the fruiting trees can reach 12 feet at maturity; this height is still too much fruit tree for me.

Allowing newly planted fruit trees to grow only as tall as we want is easy, though. Prune in late summer like a hedge to control the height, and prune in late winter for detail. Treat them more like a hedge and less like a commercial production tree and the result is a manageable size that is better suited to a residential backyard.



Allow each semi-dwarf tree to grow to hedge height and then no higher. Prune exactly as you would a large hedge, keeping the trees at 6-8 feet tall. At this height varieties are easy to pick, easy to spray, and easy to cover in case they begin to attract fruit-hungry birds.

Plant fruit trees just as you would any other trees or shrubs in the landscape. However, for a really great fruiting landscape, top-dress the roots with a 3" layer of shredded bark right after planting. The bark keeps soil cool in summer and regulates soil temperatures through winter. Fruit trees will produce better with this additional landscaping step because roots thrive in more constant soil temperatures.



To learn more about fruit trees, check out our other ebook: [The Complete Guide to Fruit Trees.](#)

Evergreens

Rows of evergreen plants are always a good choice for a privacy screen. Of course, evergreens are thick year round, but, unfortunately, are slow growers.

Mountain Gardener Tip: *To successfully add evergreens to a landscape, there are several essential steps that are worth your time and energy. The most important requirement for evergreen trees to thrive is drainage. Blend one shovelful of composted mulch into every three shovels of native earth to pack around your plant's roots. Feed new trees with Watters' specially formulated "All Purpose Plant Food 7-4-4;" the cottonseed meal in this natural food promotes better root formation while maintaining good foliage color. Evergreens love it. Lastly, water your newly planted trees with a solution of 'Root & Grow.' This water additive tickles the roots of a plant and helps to form a deep root system.*



When you're ready to choose the trees for your living wall of green, read through the list that follows. It is comprised of screeners that do well in our mountains. The list contains the names of evergreens that, over the years, have performed well for many people throughout central and northern Arizona.

The cypress is a screen plant that is as natural as an Arizona sunset. The **Arizona cypress** grows 18'x12' wide and is a classic blue that blends well with any landscape. **Leyland cypress** is the same size and just as hardy as her Arizona cousin but has a more formal look and feel. The needles have a fan or flared soft appearance and are rich emerald shades of green. Either cypress naturalizes well in local landscapes.



Deodar Cedar – This is the largest of the screening plants, growing to over 50 feet tall and 18 feet wide with long swooping branches of Arizona blue foliage. Growing some 2-3 feet per year, it is one of the fastest growing of the screeners. As with most upright evergreens, this cedar can thrive on low water use, drought conditions, and drip irrigation. Make sure to give it plenty of growing space because this tree is going to need it!

Green Mountain Pine – This dense pine is easy to care for and as hardy as native pines. Its rich green needles are sturdy and more numerous than those of other pines, with less needle drop in summer. Thick branches all the way to the ground and 18' heights make it the perfect windbreak and privacy screen for wide-open spaces.

Fat Albert Spruce – Spruce are the slowest growers, but few other evergreens produce color so blue they can look almost silver. Like other evergreen trees, this mountain classic Colorado spruce doesn't like to be over-watered so it's important that the planting holes drain well.



Giant Sequoia – Few people know that the largest tree growing on the Prescott courthouse lawns is a Sequoia; it proudly towers over the American Elms that populate the square. Many local golf courses use this evergreen in their landscapes. This stately, pyramidal tree is heavily covered in Arizona gray-green foliage, and is well-suited for larger estates, home sites, and ranches. It is so deeply rooted that it naturalizes with ease in mountain landscapes.



Juniper – Hillspire, Blue Point, and Wichita are on the extensive list of junipers available at garden centers now. Juniper forests surround us, so you know that junipers are local natives. Whichever color and height you like, all grow well here.



Austrian Pine – A very resilient pine in the poor soils and alkaline conditions of the mountainous West. It's remarkably tolerant of hot and cold wind and is a crucial component in shelterbelts and windbreaks. Adapts well to dry conditions, both in semi-desert and local mountain foothills where soils are thin and poor. It makes a very graceful single specimen for front yards, parks, or expansive estate-sized landscapes. The needles are long and dark green like the native Ponderosa, yet it holds its foliage right to the ground.

Deciduous trees

Deciduous plants, those that lose their leaves in winter, grow much faster and provide great screening for every season but winter. Most of us don't use the back patio, pool, or deck in winter, so in some instances a fast-growing deciduous screen is a viable option. However, if you plan to use your hot tub while there is snow on the ground, you might need to plant tall evergreens along with deciduous plants for a fast, thick screen.



Autumn Blaze Maple – An improved maple with brilliant, long lasting orange-red fall color, a uniform branching habit, and rapid growth rate. It thrives in our warmer mountain climates. Maples are deciduous, but after they lose their leaves the white bark comes close to the winter beauty of local aspens.

Sweetgum – Plant a grove or single specimen of sweetgum in your yard for a guaranteed autumn show. With a columnar shape like aspen and birch, this tree creates an ideal screen in narrow side yards. Use to separate multi-story homes on narrow lots. Pretty as a pair flanking a driveway or garden gateway, it also makes the perfect carefree accent for less interesting, drought-resistant trees.





Smoke Tree – Plays well with others in groupings, hedges, or windbreaks. Smoke trees like hot, dry weather, and thrive in virtually any mountain soil. They have fascinating textures and add a punch of color in small spaces. In summer, they sport wispy, pink bloom clusters; in fall, the foliage turns orange and red. The rest of the year leaves are purple, gold, or green. Extremely mountain hardy.

Jack Flowering Pear – This harbinger of spring is a tolerant tree, not bothered much by dry, wet, and polluted environments. It does well in clay soil. A spectacular display of white flowers usually shows up in March before leaves emerge. Most famous for its white spring flowers, its shady dark green leaves of summer are followed by fall hues of red and gold, delivering beauty in all seasons. It's hard to ask for more in a small tree.



Regal Petticoat Maple – Superior leaf colors during all growing seasons. In spring and summer each unusually colored leaf is a deep glossy green with a deep velvety purple underside. Autumn leaves turn aspen yellow on top and bright magenta pink on the underside accented with reds, oranges, and salmons. WOW, is all you can say about this tree in fall! With superior disease resistance this shade tree also has proven to be alkaline and salt tolerant as it matures.

Dura Heat Birch – This beautiful tree is best suited for planting, like aspens, in groups of 3-5. Is an excellent tree for the limited space of a narrow front yard. Use in mixed forest groves to add interest with its unusual paper-white bark. This nontoxic tree is a safe choice near horse corrals and livestock pens. Its white bark and wispy leaves are like an aspen, but far easier to grow. Disease, bug, and wind resistant in the Arizona mountains.



Royal Raindrop Crabapple – Deep pink to red flowers are followed by decorative, long-lasting red fruits that are attractive to birds and people alike. Stunning, deeply lobed purple foliage turns bright orange through autumn. If you want a pretty tree that is also easy to care for, this cute ornamental should be on the top of your list.

Vines

One of the greatest benefits of vines are their bold, vibrant colors. For privacy sooner rather than later, many annual vines are fast-growing. That's why garden centers may not keep many in stock. If you can't find the vine you want, try starting it from seed. Their fast-growing tendrils will take over structures, grow through other plants, and completely cover trellises. If you're more interested in perennial vines, they rival annuals in beauty but take more time to become established. You may have more luck finding these varieties at the garden center.



Mandevilla (Sun Parasol) – This vine has flowers that are among the largest and showiest blooms with non-stop color from spring through fall. The blooms are set off by luxurious, dark green foliage on chubby vines. They do well in large containers, in raised beds, growing up a trellis, and as a vine that dresses up that ho-hum mailbox. Stems will grow long and twining, but can be kept trimmed to a more bushy shape, which encourages maximum flowering. Water well when first planted, but once established, let them dry out between watering. They utterly thrive in heat and dry conditions! Treat these beauties as an annual, and when the cool weather of winter arrives, trim them back and let them overwinter indoors in a sunny window.

Canary Creeper is a late season bloomer, starting in July and going through October. Its yellow flowers resemble feathery birds. The foliage is very attractive, with deeply divided palm-shaped leaves. A vigorous grower, but like its nasturtium cousins, it needs something to climb up like a fence or deck railings. It also looks good simply scrambling through other plants.



Climbing Snapdragon – Although sharing a name and with remarkably similar flowers, this climber is not a true snapdragon. The free-flowering vine is great in containers and spilling over walls. The vines will twine around strings and trellises and can be cut back if flowering fades. Climbing snapdragons can even be grown as houseplants. Flowers come in red, pink, lavender, and blue with speckled white chins.



Cup and Saucer Vine – These unusual looking flowers are sweetly scented. With delicate tendrils, the vines gently attach themselves to supports. The actual flower, in lavenders and white, is the “cup,” surrounded by a “saucer” or collar of green calyx. Cup and Saucer vines take a while to start blooming, so it helps to start them early indoors. The flat seeds germinate better when planted on their edges. This makes them less prone to rot.

Ornamental Gourd isn't grown for its flowers, but for its seed pods or gourds. There are a good variety of gourds that grow easily in just a few months. Many people let the vines sprawl on the ground, like squash, but if you are growing them for decoration, they will remain cleaner and less pest prone if you give them a structure to climb. A pergola or arbor looks especially whimsical with the vines growing across it, and the gourds dangling overhead. Many varieties are easy to dry to be used as decorations and crafts, like a gourd birdhouse.



Purple Hyacinth Bean – Everything about this vine is riotous color. The heart shaped leaves have purple veining on the under-sides with stems that are in shades of deep purple. The profuse blooms are a rich lavender and the glossy bean pods are a day-glow purple. At one time this plant was an important foraged food source, but now it is mostly grown as an ornamental. The vines grow quickly and start flowering early with gusto. Flowers taper off as the pods begin to form, but the plants remain attractive and continue spiraling upward.



Scarlet Runner Bean – makes a nice eating bean when harvested young. However, as there are better-tasting beans, this variety is grown mainly for its beautiful flowers and showy bean pods. Once you try this plant in the garden you will understand why it's earned its strong reputation as a popular flowering show vine.

Mountain Gardener Tip: *The vines can get long and heavy very quickly, so they must be provided a strong support. Although Scarlet Runner is commonly available, there are many other runner beans available in shades of red, pink, white, and combinations of colors. 'Painted Lady' has a soft red and white flower and the vines can tolerate heat better than most runner beans. 'Moonlight' is a pure white flower that produces one of the better-tasting, stringless runner bean pods.*

Sweet Pea vines look deceptively fragile; however, they are tough little vines that favor the cooler temperatures of spring and fall in the mountains. The flowers are known for their heavy, sweet fragrance, but not all new cultivars are heavily scented. For specific details be sure to read the plant tag before purchasing.



Mountain Gardener Tip: *Sweet peas make great cut flowers, and the more they're cut, the longer the vines bloom.*

Conclusion

There are nearly endless varieties of beautiful, water-friendly, and low-maintenance options when choosing plants for your privacy screen. The time you have to develop it, where it will be planted, and what the rest of your landscape looks like will dramatically affect your choice of plants.

If you want more information or have questions about privacy screen plants, stop by the garden center. Any of our team members can help you plan your screen and choose the right plants for your garden or yard.

Thanks for downloading our ebook and I look forward to seeing you at the garden center soon!

Best,

Ken Lain,

The Mountain Gardener

