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Living Fences

August 18, 2010 || Text by Jean Burrows

A living fence might be the greenest way to define property lines while adding privacy and interest.

SOCIAL MEDIA START



When deciding which material to construct your fence from, the greenest choice you can make is just that—greenery. Living fences use plant material such as trees, shrubs and vines to create barriers. They can be as simple as a row of evergreen trees or as complex as a structure made of interwoven living willow branches. Not only do they provide privacy and define property lines, they can also cool your outdoor living space by creating shade, absorb large amounts of carbon dioxide to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and, depending on the species chosen, provide food and habitat for wildlife.

If you have a rural property,

you can even install a windbreak—a row of plants that forces the wind up and over them—to shelter buildings and reduce heating costs.

Experienced landscapers can recommend species that will grow best in your climate zone and soil type and will know how to properly prepare the plant bed. They will know which species should be avoided because their root system might interfere with water and sewer lines. And if the fence runs along the sidewalk, they'll suggest species that can withstand irrigation from passing dogs and salt spray from the road.

Evergreen, a non-profit organization dedicated to the greening of urban environments, recommends choosing fast-growing tree species, such as cedar and serviceberry, and dense shrub species, like dogwood and viburnum, to create barriers. They also recommend including plants that will flower at different times of the year or that have coloured bark or seed pods for winter interest.

"Vines are a fantastic solution for a fast-growing living wall," adds Eric Poupore, owner/operator of Arcadia Garden and Landscape Services in Toronto. Arcadia builds the framework to support the growing vines, some of which can be trained into different patterns. You can also use existing built features such as fences, arbours and pergolas to support the vines.

"Tranquil is the word I use to describe the effect of a living fence," says Tony Biglieri, president of The Living Wall (www.thelivingwall.net), a Toronto-based firm that has installed living fences in Ontario and Quebec. Its installers hand-weave willow shoots into a wooden framework that eventually biodegrades—the willows grow into each other to form a dense fence. "Privacy fences are isolating. If you put up an eight-foot-high wooden privacy fence around a long, narrow lot, it can feel like you're living in a sardine can," he says.

The willows that The Living Wall uses need to be pruned every one to three years, Biglieri says. This may not be true of other species, so be sure to get pruning instructions from your contractors. If you're not interested in taking on the ongoing maintenance (watering, pruning and feeding) of a living fence, it might not be the best option for you.

Also check your local bylaws to see if there is a maximum height for hedges and whether an installation such as a living wall would be considered a fence or vegetation. If it is considered a fence, it will have to adhere to local fencing bylaws.

INFO START
