

Habitat Hedgerows



Attract and sustain beneficial wildlife in your garden with a versatile hedgerow composed of plants that provide food and cover year round.

BY KRIS WETHERBEE

A variety of shrubs and small trees intermingled with perennials creates a multilayered hedgerow that offers a continuous supply of food and shelter for wildlife through the seasons.

MARY YEE

HEDGEROWS, those less-formal cousins of hedges, provide a long list of benefits wherever they grow. They typically include a variety of tree and shrub species that vary in height, as opposed to hedges, which are usually made up of a single species in a closely spaced row. The resulting layers of plants mimic a woodland or forest edge, fulfilling different habitat functions for wildlife such as shelter, nesting sites, and food sources.

With a little planning and careful plant selection, gardeners can replicate nature's wonderful design while using hedgerows to create privacy, define property lines, screen unsightly views, minimize erosion, reduce sound pollution, and buffer strong winds.

FROM THE BACK FORTY TO THE BACKYARD

Hedgerows are most often seen in Europe and North America, where they are typically used to line field borders and contain livestock. But a hedgerow can be adapted to suburban settings by selecting smaller trees and shrubs to create an informal, wildlife-friendly perimeter to the more manicured parts of the landscape.

"Hedgerows can provide a slice of wild on the outskirts of a landscape design," says Rebecca Lindenmeyr, co-principal of Linden L.A.N.D. Group, an ecological landscape design/build firm in Shelburne, Vermont. "They represent diverse and complex woodland margins with trees, shrubs, forbs, grasses, and sedges, enhanced with wildflower species that provide vital pollinator habitat," she adds.

Interest in habitat hedgerows for suburban landscapes is growing. "I'm seeing hedgerows replacing more formal hedging—less formal hedging suits most Northwest gardens," says Valerie Easton, a former horticultural librarian and garden blogger in Langley, Washington.

"Screening for privacy doesn't have to mean a soldierly, neatly-clipped row

Top right: Native plants such as the evergreen eastern juniper (*Juniperus virginiana*) in the background and the flowering arrowwood viburnum (*Viburnum dentatum*) in the foreground work well in habitat hedgerows. **Right:** Fruit-producing plants like this 'Autumn Brilliance' serviceberry (*Amelanchier* × *grandiflora*) will cater to several bird species, including American robins.





As part of a habitat hedgerow, this native staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*) not only supports wildlife with its nectar-rich spring flowers and conelike clusters of red berries that follow, it offers a pop of orange to red fall color to the landscape.

of shrubs,” says Linda Lehmusvirta, producer of “Central Texas Gardener” for KLRU-TV (PBS), Austin, who has observed the same trend in her region. “In Texas, more gardeners are going for habitat plantings to shield views or create conversation nooks.”

PLANNING YOUR HEDGEROW

Start by deciding how you want your hedgerow to function aside from supporting wildlife. For example, if it will serve as a windbreak, site it so that it will block prevailing winds. If you want a screen, select shrubs and trees with denser growth habits or are evergreen.

Next, figure out the ultimate height that will work best within your space. If you want a hedgerow that doesn’t block your view, for instance, select smaller shrubs that naturally top out at five feet or less.

Keep in mind that your hedgerow should include a mix of layers and different heights. This is important because wildlife exists at all levels of the vertical space. For example, some birds, such as chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, and finches, forage for food in trees or taller

shrubs, while juncos, sparrows, towhees, and doves are primarily ground feeders.

The depth of your hedgerow is another consideration; it should be between 10 and 20 feet deep. Wider spaces allow for more plants, which means greater habitat potential. If you have a like-minded neighbor with an adjacent property, you can maximize the depth of your hedgerow—and its wildlife value—if each of you plants a hedgerow on either side of the property line.

PLANT SELECTION

The key to creating a successful habitat hedgerow is choosing the right plants for your space and climate. This means that the growing requirements of the plants you select should be compatible with the soil, water, and light conditions of your site.

Focus on trees and shrubs that produce edible fruit, nuts, seeds, or berries. Include a mix of flowering plants that will attract pollinators and other beneficial insects. For best results, select plants that flower and fruit at different times of the year.

The greater the diversity of plants, the more needs of wildlife your hedgerow will meet. Janet Allen, president and founder

of her local Wild Ones chapter in central New York, observed this in her own garden after she and her husband replaced their backyard flowerbeds several years ago with a habitat hedgerow of shrubs underplanted with native perennials.

“What we didn’t realize at the time was that our hedgerow provided much more than just berries,” notes Allen. “Ornamental flowers also provided nectar and pollen for pollinators. Some of the denser shrubs, such as gray dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*) and silky dogwood (*C. amomum*) are excellent cover and nesting areas for birds. More recently, we learned that many of these native shrubs are host plants for caterpillars—essential food for baby birds.”

Be sure the mature size of plants you select suits your space. “Hedgerows always seem to grow larger than expected here in the Northwest,” says Easton, who advises suburban gardeners to “stay away from the larger conifers, elderberries, and other big, rangy plants.”

Allen agrees, advising that those with more limited space choose “native species that provide the most benefit for wildlife and forego those that tend to get out of bounds.”

RECOMMENDED HEDGEROW PLANTS

The plant palette for a hedgerow is somewhat different for each region of the country. For example, Linda Lehmusvirta in Austin, Texas, suggests gardeners in her region “let the natural forms of native evergreen yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) and Texas mountain laurel (*Sophora secundiflora*) gracefully enchant your borders in sun while attracting birds and pollinators. In shade to part sun, choose drought-tough viburnums that can be shaped or not, and in spring attract native bees and wasps to nectar.”

“Here in the Northwest,” says Valerie Easton of Langley, Washington, “we have the luxury of lots of hardy evergreens to choose from, so our hedgerows tend to have at least as many evergreens (mahonias, evergreen blueberries, native rhododendrons) as deciduous plants like our native flowering currant, huckleberries, and native Nootka roses.”

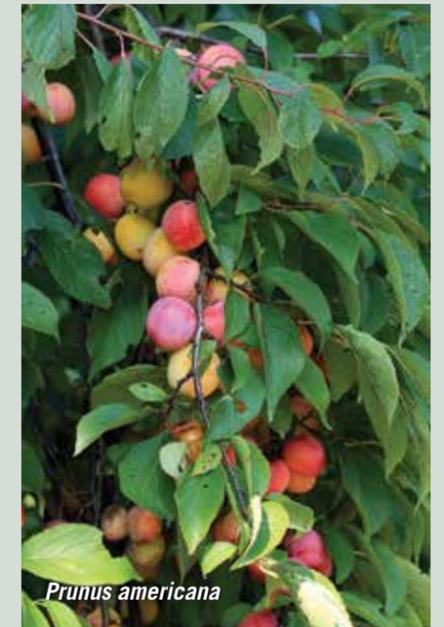
The following are just a few of the many wildlife-friendly small trees and shrubs that can be used in many regions to form the bones of a backyard hedgerow. Underplanting shade tolerant perennials, groundcovers, and grasses will increase wildlife benefits. —K.W.

MEDIUM TO SMALL SHRUBS

- Beautyberries (*Callicarpa* spp.)
- Bush cherries and plums (*Prunus* spp.)
- Chokeberries (*Aronia* spp.)
- Cotoneasters (*Cotoneaster* spp.)
- Creosote bush (*Larrea tridentata*)
- Currants (*Ribes* spp.)
- Evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*)
- Highbush cranberry (*Viburnum edule*)
- Junipers (*Juniperus* spp.)
- Mahonias (*Mahonia* spp.)
- Natal plum (*Carissa macrocarpa*)
- Native roses (*Rosa* spp.)
- Red huckleberry (*Vaccinium parvifolium*)
- Salal (*Gaultheria shallon*)
- Sumacs (*Rhus* spp.)
- Sweetspire (*Itea virginica*)
- Texas silverleaf (*Leucophyllum frutescens*)
- Western sand cherry (*Prunus besseyi*)



Mahonia bealei



Prunus americana

SMALL TREES AND TALL SHRUBS

- Alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus* ‘Columnaris’)
- American arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*)
- American hornbeam (*Carpinus caroliniana*)
- Common spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)
- Crabapples (*Malus* spp.)
- Dogwoods (*Cornus* spp.)
- Hawthorns (*Crataegus* spp.)
- Hazelnuts (*Corylus americana*, *C. avellana*)
- Hollies (*Ilex* spp.)
- Juneberries/serviceberries (*Amelanchier* spp.)
- Mountain ash (*Sorbus americana*)
- Viburnums (*Viburnum* spp.)
- Vine maple (*Acer circinatum*)
- Wild cherries and plums (*Prunus* spp.)



Ilex verticillata ‘Winter Red’

MARK TURNER

TOP: BILL JOHNSON (2); BOTTOM: SUSAN A. ROTH

That said, plants in a hedgerow are meant to overlap, so you can space them about 75 percent closer together than you would if they were being grown as specimens. For a list of trees and shrubs suitable for hedgerows, see page 27.

DESIGN TIPS

Hedgerows certainly will have a natural, informal look, but it's still important to keep aesthetics in mind. "To be acceptable in residential landscapes, habitat hedgerows need to strike a balance between science and good design, between our desire to be good stewards and still maintain a sense of order," says Lindenmeyr.

When including habitat hedgerows in designs, Lindenmeyr strives to develop landscapes that include both intentionally designed areas and wild areas—"some for

that span the seasons. Plants that flower and fruit at different times of the year not only help sustain wildlife, they add pops of seasonal color. Many wildlife-friendly plants contribute textural contrasts to the landscape, while others offer colorful fall foliage or attractive bark for winter interest.

Repetition—repeating plants or colors within the hedgerow, or using hedgerow plants in other parts of the landscape—helps create visual flow and harmony within the landscape. Mass plantings or large drifts of color also help unify the space.

"We prefer natural landscaping rather than the manicured look, but we've followed some conventional design guidelines," says Allen. For example, she and her husband have planted odd-numbered groups of plants, placing taller plants toward the back and shorter plants in front.



When designing this hedgerow in her central New York garden, Janet Allen followed traditional design tenets to achieve a "wild" yet aesthetically pleasing look.

us and some for them." She encourages her clients to "accept a side order of messy with their main entrée of eco-neat-and-tidy."

One technique Lindenmeyr uses to integrate habitat hedgerows into the greater landscape is "by edging the wildness with ribbons of order—simplified plantings and bold brushstrokes of color."

Year-round landscape interest can be achieved by selecting plants with attributes

"We don't plant in rows but at random. We make sure that we fill the area not just with shrubs but with other plants, such as moss phlox (*Phlox subulata*), to minimize the opportunity for weeds to take hold."

MAINTENANCE NEEDS

Deciding on the look you want—more orderly or more natural—will impact your maintenance chores. "Hedgerows can look

Resources

The Living Landscape: Designing for Beauty and Biodiversity in the Home Garden by Rick Darke and Douglas W. Tallamy. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2014.

National Wildlife Federation: Attracting Birds, Butterflies & Other Backyard Wildlife by David Mizejewski. Fox Chapel Publishing, East Petersburg, PA, 2004.

Wild Ones: Native Plants, Natural Landscapes, www.wildones.org.

more groomed or wilder, depending on plant choice and pruning style," says garden consultant Jeanie Taylor of Yamhill County, Oregon, who adds, "An annual review and trimming is a good idea."

It will take a few years for your habitat hedgerow to become established; during this time, keep young plants watered and mulched. "When we first planted, we mulched the area, but now that the plants have matured, we simply let the fallen leaves remain on the ground," says Allen. "We prune some shrubs each spring, and we monitor plants such as gray dogwood or native roses that try to escape the area we've designated for them," she adds.

Weeding is important. "Birds drop a complete laundry list of invasive or irritating weedy species, but there might be some natives in there to surprise you as well," says Taylor, who advises, "Weed early and weed often."

FINISHING TOUCHES

Your wildlife visitors will appreciate the addition of water sources, such as a bird bath or saucer of moist sand on the ground, to your habitat hedgerow. Nesting boxes and feeders encourage birds to visit the area before your plants have begun flowering and fruiting.

As your hedgerow matures, you can enjoy not only your garden's plants but also the life those plants support. As Allen says, "We've grown to appreciate a different kind of beauty and have benefited mind, body, and soul from reconnecting with nature right in our own yard." 🌿

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