



Designing a beautiful BACK BORDER

Learn how to hide a fence by creating a year-round bed with interesting plant shapes, colors, and textures

BY STACIE CROOKS

Bold colors and forms keep your attention up front. By repeating hues and generously filling the space with stalwart plants, the author has made the fence in the background disappear.



| DESIGN |

A recipe for building an engaging border

When it comes to designing a garden, everyone has site-specific goals in mind. No matter if your top goal is improving a view or masking an eyesore, the strategies for creating a high-performance border are the same. Keep these principles in mind, and you'll be well on your way to creating a beautiful and lasting view.

1| Give beds extra depth. Providing adequate space for trees and shrubs allows the plantings to be layered dynamically instead of being placed in an unnatural, rigid lineup.

2| Choose a limited color palette. Sticking with a simple set of hues echoed along the border keeps the scene unified and orderly.

3| Don't use straight lines. Curving the bed edge along a fence leads to more space to plant and a better visual flow.

4| Select plants for year-round interest. Choosing most of your plants for multisession interest provides the best display for the least amount of effort.

5| Include varied textures. Selecting different plants with glossy, muted, wide, and narrow foliage adds an intriguing interplay of dimension.

No one wants to sit in their backyard and stare at a fence, no matter how pretty it is. I have been designing gardens for decades, and not once has someone said, "I want a view of the fence." The traditional response is to camouflage the fence with a hedge of identical green shrubs. As gardeners, however, we know there is a better approach. When confronted with the fence in my own backyard, I considered it an opportunity to create a border using distinctive shapes, colors, and textures. The result is a bright, low-maintenance border that is attractive in all seasons, whether I am viewing it from inside the house or outside on my patio.



BEFORE

Fences serve many functions, but they are not necessarily pleasant to look at. Even though these structures are helpful for keeping pets safe within our yards and providing privacy, the scene they create can be sorely lacking without the addition of plants.

UNDULATING LINES CREATE THE ILLUSION OF MOVEMENT

I began by giving my border enough depth to be able to sustain some larger trees and shrubs that will not outgrow their place when they reach maturity. My fence-camouflaging border is 100 feet long (the full length of my property) and is 6 to 8 feet deep in varied sections. At the far-end corner it is 15 feet deep. By creating a bed that can fit larger plants, I have the ability to layer the plantings so they look natural and parklike rather than like a line of tall plants crammed into a narrow space in an obvious attempt to screen the fence.

This deep bed gives the trees and shrubs the space they need to mature naturally, which means I can avoid regularly pruning

the woodies away from the lawn or walkway. (Trust me: You'll be glad in the future that you made your garden beds deeper and sacrificed a little lawn.)

Rarely do we see perfectly straight lines in nature, so rather than echoing the straight line created by the fence, I gave my border a serpentine edge to provide the illusion of movement. This strategy naturally draws the eye along the length of the bed and away from the fence. This shape also gives the impression that the border has a greater length. When choosing my plants, I selected species that would fill, yet stay inside, an imaginary vertical boundary to ensure the border kept its intended flowing form both vertically and horizontally.

A PLANT PALETTE THAT IS MOSTLY EVERGREEN MASKS THE FENCE THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

When selecting plants for a fence-line border, I make at least three-quarters of the plantings evergreen. My goal is to hide the fence as much as possible without creating the look of a fortress. The evergreens, of course, create interest in winter while still blocking the fence. The remaining quarter of the plants I choose are selected for seasonal interest from spring through fall. Keep in mind that this evergreen and deciduous



Choose reliable performers with a long season of interest.

Perennials that require little care can provide worry-free and pleasing pockets of color and texture.



To see the plant IDs in this long border, go to FineGardening.com/web-extras.

plant material balance also means less work. The less deciduous plant material you choose for your border, the less cleanup you will have to do at the end of fall.

When using mostly evergreen plants to provide fence coverage all year round, try to stagger your deciduous foliage and perennial bloom times so that you have color pockets throughout the seasons. Remember, though, that too much color will create the opposite effect and visually slice up your border or look chaotic.

If you are serious about creating a bed with as little maintenance as possible, choose your perennials wisely, opting for plants that don't need deadheading or staking. The perennials I use are what I call "touch me once" plants (see "Great performers that go the extra mile," facing page). After a plant goes dormant in fall, I cut it down. That perennial will need to care for itself until the following fall.

SIMPLE FLOWING COLORS CREATE A HARMONIOUS VIEW

While evergreen plants do the lion's share of the work, do not think that they all need to actually be green. I like to intersperse engaging evergreen foliage like that found on gold-variegated 'Aureomarginatus' Japanese euonymus, golden 'Sekkan-sugi' Japanese cedar, and silver-colored 'Blue Star' juniper and 'Big Ears' lambs' ears. Evergreen 'Blanchard' Southern magnolia also gives my border reflective qualities with its glossy foliage. This approach ensures that the border is highlighted with contrasting foliage that adds all-year interest.

I also like to use color to create an illusion that the border has more length to it. By repeating combinations of colors in groups, your eye moves along and then pauses at these areas unconsciously. This doesn't necessarily mean repeating the same plants, just the same hues. For example, rich wine to deep purple tones can be echoed with the foliage of 'Royal Purple' smokebush and Diabolo® ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Monlo', Zones 3–7) and the redder foliage of Golden Ruby® barberry and 'Moon Bay' heavenly bamboo in fall, while a play on yellow or golden foliage can be enjoyed by planting Tiger Eyes® sumac, 'Clemson Variegated' silverberry, and Magic Carpet® spirea.

If you follow this basic formula your success is guaranteed, because you will have created a beautiful border with year-round color, texture, and interest—and you will have hidden that fence you started out with.

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14. Bear's breeches (*Acanthus mollis*, Zones 7–11; pictured)

15. Rozanne geranium (*Geranium 'Rozanne'*, Zones 4–8; pictured)

16. 'Aureola' Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra 'Aureola'*, Zones 5–9)

17. Mardi Gras™ sneezeweed (*Helenium 'Mardi Gras'*, Zones 4–8)

18. 'Big Ears' lambs' ears (*Stachys byzantina 'Big Ears'*, syn. *S. byzantina 'Helen Von Stein'*, Zones 4–9; pictured)

1. 'Orange New Zealand sedge' (*Carex testacea*, Zones 8–9; pictured)

2. 'Mary Helen' heather (*Erica x darleyensis 'Mary Helen'*, Zones 6–9)

3. 'Blue Star' juniper (*Juniperus squamata 'Blue Star'*, Zones 4–8; pictured)

4. 'Moon Bay' heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica 'Moon Bay'*, Zones 6–9)

5. 'Densiformis' yew (*Taxus x media 'Densiformis'*, Zones 4–7)

6. Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora 'Blanchard'*, syn. *M. grandiflora 'D. D. Blanchard'*, Zones 7–9; pictured)

7. 'Royal Purple' smokebush (*Cotinus 'Royal Purple'*, Zones 5–9)

8. 'Sekkan-sugi' Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica 'Sekkan-sugi'*, Zones 6–9)

9. 'Aureomarginatus' Japanese euonymus (*Euonymus japonicus 'Aureomarginatus'*, Zones 6–9; pictured)

10. 'Blanchard' Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra 'Blanchard'*, Zones 5–9)

11. 'Tiger Eyes' sumac (*Rhus typhina 'Tiger Eyes'*, Zones 3–8; pictured)

12. 'Big Ears' lambs' ears (*Stachys byzantina 'Big Ears'*, syn. *S. byzantina 'Helen Von Stein'*, Zones 4–9; pictured)

13. 'Compacta' Hinoki cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa 'Compacta'*, Zones 4–8)

14. 'Golden Ruby' barberry (*Berberis thunbergii 'Golden Ruby'*, Zones 4–8; pictured)

15. 'Blue Star' juniper (*Juniperus squamata 'Blue Star'*, Zones 4–8; pictured)

16. 'Aureola' Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra 'Aureola'*, Zones 5–9)

17. 'Big Ears' lambs' ears (*Stachys byzantina 'Big Ears'*, syn. *S. byzantina 'Helen Von Stein'*, Zones 4–9; pictured)

18. 'Orange New Zealand sedge' (*Carex testacea*, Zones 8–9; pictured)

19. 'Mary Helen' heather (*Erica x darleyensis 'Mary Helen'*, Zones 6–9)

20. 'Blue Star' juniper (*Juniperus squamata 'Blue Star'*, Zones 4–8; pictured)

21. 'Moon Bay' heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica 'Moon Bay'*, Zones 6–9)

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23. 'Aureola' Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra 'Aureola'*, Zones 5–9)

24. 'Blanchard' Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora 'Blanchard'*, syn. *M. grandiflora 'D. D. Blanchard'*, Zones 7–9; pictured)

25. 'Royal Purple' smokebush (*Cotinus 'Royal Purple'*, Zones 5–9)

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27. 'Aureomarginatus' Japanese euonymus (*Euonymus japonicus 'Aureomarginatus'*, Zones 6–9; pictured)

28. 'Blanchard' Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra 'Blanchard'*, Zones 5–9)

29. 'Tiger Eyes' sumac (*Rhus typhina 'Tiger Eyes'*, Zones 3–8; pictured)

30. 'Big Ears' lambs' ears (*Stachys byzantina 'Big Ears'*, syn. *S. byzantina 'Helen Von Stein'*, Zones 4–9; pictured)

Photos, except where noted: doreenwynja.com. Bottom photo, p. 30: courtesy of Stacie Crooks. Photos this page: Michelle Genais (15); Kerry Ann Moore (11).

| STACIE'S FAVORITE FENCE PLANTS |

Great performers that go the extra mile

A balanced mix of woody plants and perennials delivers the best show throughout the year.

TREES AND SHRUBS

1. **Golden Ruby® barberry** (*Berberis thunbergii** 'Goruzam', Zones 4–8; pictured)
2. **'Compacta' Hinoki cypress** (*Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Compacta', Zones 4–8)
3. **'Royal Purple' smokebush** (*Cotinus 'Royal Purple'*, Zones 5–9)
4. **'Sekkan-sugi' Japanese cedar** (*Cryptomeria japonica* 'Sekkan-sugi', Zones 6–9)
5. **'Aureomarginatus' Japanese euonymus** (*Euonymus japonicus* 'Aureomarginatus', Zones 6–9; pictured)
6. **'Blanchard' Southern magnolia** (*Magnolia grandiflora* 'Blanchard', syn. *M. grandiflora* 'D. D. Blanchard', Zones 7–9; pictured)
7. **Tiger Eyes® sumac** (*Rhus typhina* 'Baltiger', Zones 3–8; pictured)
8. **Magic Carpet® spirea** (*Spiraea japonica** 'Walbuma', Zones 4–9; pictured)

UNDERSTORY EVERGREENS

9. **Orange New Zealand sedge** (*Carex testacea*, Zones 8–9; pictured)
10. **'Mary Helen' heather** (*Erica x darleyensis* 'Mary Helen', Zones 6–9)
11. **'Blue Star' juniper** (*Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Star', Zones 4–8; pictured)
12. **'Moon Bay' heavenly bamboo** (*Nandina domestica** 'Moon Bay', Zones 6–9)
13. **'Densiformis' yew** (*Taxus x media* 'Densiformis', Zones 4–7)

PERENNIALS

14. **Bear's breeches** (*Acanthus mollis*, Zones 7–11; pictured)
15. **Rozanne geranium** (*Geranium* 'Rozanne', Zones 4–8; pictured)
16. **'Aureola' Japanese forest grass** (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', Zones 5–9)
17. **Mardi Gras™ sneezeweed** (*Helenium* 'Helbro', Zones 4–8)
18. **'Big Ears' lambs' ears** (*Stachys byzantina* 'Big Ears', syn. *S. byzantina* 'Helen Von Stein', Zones 4–9; pictured)

*See invasive alert on page 81.

11.