



A birch copse and pleached hedging offer privacy in a garden by Sara Jane Rothwell MSGD

Photo: Marianne Majerus

# IN SEARCH OF SECLUSION

Annie Guilfoyle looks at how to create peaceful, private spaces, even in small urban gardens

**P**rivacy and seclusion are often right up there on the client's wish list. In a world where people willingly divulge information about themselves on social media, there still seems to be a desire for privacy and private spaces. In a densely populated world, this is becoming increasingly harder to achieve, however.

Though the garden is a place where we go to find peace, seclusion and tranquillity, often this is not easy, when a typical terraced-house garden is overlooked on many sides, making it an almost impossible task for a designer to achieve complete privacy. When client expectations are running high,

it is crucial from the outset to be realistic and upfront about what can be achieved. Building up the garden boundaries will probably increase the amount of shaded areas on both sides of the fence. This could result in a dispute, especially if people feel that their garden is being unfairly shaded and their right to light is being compromised.

Two metres is the maximum height for a garden boundary in the UK, although it is advisable to double-check whether, due to the location of the garden, other restrictions may apply. For example, in some conservation areas there could be additional restrictive covenants, such as a 'hedge only, no fence rule'. There are no height restrictions on boundary hedges as such, but there is now a procedure in place for a high hedge complaint action, should an evergreen hedge grow to more than 2m in height and be deemed a 'nuisance' by the neighbour (find out more at [rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?pid=408](https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?pid=408)). These regulations are in place in order to be fair, ensuring each garden has adequate privacy but hedges do not cause excessive shade.

## The big cover up

A practical approach would be to try to design an area within the garden where greater privacy can be achieved without affecting the neighbouring gardens. A well-positioned tree or group of trees can offer dappled or even complete shade, especially during the summer months. It is surprising how little cover is required to produce a feeling of seclusion, whether it is from a tree or a built structure.

"Boundary heights are often limiting, so additional screening can be provided by planting large specimen trees within the →

garden,” says designer James Aldridge. “Much of my work centres on smaller urban gardens where space is at a premium. A regular approach is to treat the boundaries as an inherent part of the design, often following the architecture of the building or interior and taking it out into the garden. Boundaries are often treated as living walls and clothed in either a single evergreen climber species or a mixture.”

In a Thames-side garden where privacy was a major issue, Aldridge planted large multi-stemmed *Arbutus unedo* to provide seclusion. It helped to screen the garden from the neighbours and direct the view towards the river. This clever tactic of distracting the attention away from a problem is often extremely effective. In a similar London garden in Putney, he planted a single large specimen *Ficus* that provides a strong focal point, with the large palmate leaves offering an effective summer canopy.

Aldridge is good at finding solutions to tricky privacy problems – his recent use of an innovative fibreglass product called ‘Sticks’ on a commercial roof terrace proved to be an excellent way of providing screening without increasing the load. (This project will be the focus of a full feature in an upcoming edition of the *GDJ*.)

### Green screens

In urban gardens, designer Sara Jane Rothwell MSGD often uses multi-stemmed trees grouped together to create a small copse, which gives seasonal interest as well as shelter. Rothwell also uses pleached panels to make ‘green screens’ that rise above the 2m boundary planning restriction. As long as the trees used are deciduous, then they should escape the High Hedges Act. But this is still a grey area, and needs to be handled with care if it could potentially block views.

Pre-Registered SGD Member Arit Anderson came up with an innovative solution to an extremely challenging brief in an overlooked urban garden. Her design features a full-length slate water wall that acts as a strong focal point, plus the sound of the water helps to mask the city din. Anderson specified an ingenious pergola that spanned the width of the garden with an automated roof, made of aluminium slats, that could be opened and closed from inside the house, offering complete privacy when the slats were fully closed (see more in the July 2016 edition of the *GDJ*).

In one of my own projects, in the sunny seaside town of Lyme Regis, my client had bought a newly developed cottage with a miniscule rear garden. The garden was not only a very odd ‘dog-leg’ shape, but was also overlooked by all the other cottages in the development. I was asked to design a garden that provided some sanctuary where my client could sit, relax and enjoy her →



Photo: James Aldridge



Photo: Annie Guilfoyle

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** James Aldridge used *Arbutus* trees to create privacy in this Putney garden; Annie Guilfoyle used a bespoke metal pergola structure to create a private zone in this awkward garden in Lyme Regis; ‘Sticks’ are a new product made of fibre glass rods that work as a screen, a wind break and a lighting feature; Arit Anderson designed this space with slate water wall and adjustable pergola to shelter the owners from overlooking buildings



Photo: Arit Anderson

“IT IS SURPRISING HOW LITTLE COVER IS REQUIRED TO PRODUCE A FEELING OF SECLUSION WHETHER IT IS FROM A TREE OR A BUILT STRUCTURE”



Photo: Extremis



Photo: RHS/Sarah Cuttle

**TOP** Martin Royer's Final5 Retreat show garden at RHS Hampton Court 2016, with louvred adjustable fencing  
**RIGHT** *Malus 'Evereste'* makes a good screening tree for small gardens with interest through the year

plants. The brief also included screening off the view of an ugly garage from the kitchen.

Even with such a tiny space, I managed to divide it into two areas, both of which were circular, immediately disguising the odd-shaped garden. I encircled the larger patio with a bespoke forged-steel pergola. My design for the pergola was based on the undulating waves of the nearby sea. Because it was made of steel, it allowed us to use uprights with a relatively small diameter. They were strong, stable and didn't use up much of the valuable garden space. Once clothed in climbing roses, clematis and sweet peas, it soon provided the client the privacy that she wanted.

My advice is to look inwards; take the focus away from the boundaries and, with imaginative use of materials and clever planting, it is possible to solve the privacy problem. ○



Photo: Majestic Trees

## MORE PLANTS & PRODUCTS FOR PRIVACY

- **Steve McCurdy from Majestic Trees** has several recommendations for screening trees, depending on what is required. "Panel-pleached trees offer elegant screening up to about 3.5m, if budget allows. Evergreen varieties include *Photinia x fraseri* 'Red Robin', *Ilex* 'Nellie R. Stevens', *Quercus ilex* and *Prunus laurocerasus* 'Novita'."
- **If you need deciduous options**, hornbeam and beech are still the best choices, retaining their coppery leaves through winter. *Pyrus calleryana* 'Chanticleer' offers spring blossom and fiery autumn colour right through to Christmas, as will pleached *Malus* 'Evereste' and *Prunus* 'Umineko'.
- **Where high screening is required in a small space**, he suggests standard or feathered *Thuja plicata* 'Excelsa' hedging, "which can be contained with light pruning if needed".
- **For small gardens where a neighbour's windows** overlook the garden, McCurdy says *Pyrus calleryana* 'Chanticleer', *Liquidambar styraciflua* and *Parrotia persica* are good. "*Photinia x fraseri* 'Red Robin' or *Viburnum tinus* 'Lucidum' are also attractive and economical solutions," he

says, "but for something a little more dramatic, a formally clipped specimen of *Ilex* 'Nellie R. Stevens' is interesting and containable, as is a tree form of *Camellia japonica* or *Osmanthus x fortunei*."

- **For temporary screening**, or for screening off one area of a garden from others quickly, many companies now provide living screens made of ivy grown on wire mesh panels, which can be planted in the ground or kept in container troughs. Find out more from Green-Tech, Impact Plants, Treebox, Hedera Screens, Mobilane, East of Eden Plants and most instant hedging companies.
- **Also useful for screening off one area of a garden** is louvred fencing, which can be opened and closed as required, helping to control light and shade in that zone too. A good example was displayed at RHS Hampton Court last year in Pre-Registered SGD Member Martin Royer's Retreat Garden with Final5. Grange also offers panels with slats that open and close, and Tuin has metal and wood options that do the same in its Flex Fence System range.