Place plants for privacy
By Stan Rosenthal*
Thu, Mar. 28, 2002

Like most folks, I like my neighbors. And, like most folks, I get along best with them if we maintain a certain level of privacy. That's why I have a vegetative screen between me and them.

A planted barrier has several advantages over a fence. It takes little maintenance - you don't have to paint or stain it. It's cheaper and easier to install than a fence. Birds and other wildlife enjoy the food and cover it supplies. And, as a bonus, parts of it even bloom in the spring.

To keep your screen healthy and to cut down on maintenance, you'll need to do a little planning.

First decide where you want to put the plants. Then lay down a soaker hose so that water can get to each plant. Cover the hoses with mulch. Now you have your irrigation and weed control set up before you plant. The mulch also is important if you want your screen to grow quickly - it keeps the competition down.

For the vegetative screen, I like a two-layer approach.

For the early years, I use pines that grow quickly as the main screen. As they grow tall and lose their lower branches, I put in shorter plants to fill in underneath.

Let your soil dictate the type of plants you're going to use. If you are on high dry sandy soil, plant sand pines. Loblolly pines thrive in the red hills. Both types should be planted 15 to 25 feet apart.

For the shrub layer, I recommend yaupon holly and wax myrtles as the main plants. The yaupon holly does better in full sun and drier areas than the wax myrtle. Both provide good fruit and cover for songbirds. For variety, you can add a few Eastern red cedar, Southern magnolia, cherry laurel, red bay and mountain laurel. For wet areas, plant Florida anise.
Some caveats: Cherry laurel will do a great job but will spread quite readily. Mountain laurel has exquisite spring flowers but requires good soil and takes a really green thumb to grow. All these plants are evergreen.

One non-evergreen, the Chickasaw plum, can be useful because it forms a dense impenetrable thicket when grown in an open area. Also, you may want to spice up your green fence by adding flowering small trees along the outer edge of your green fence such as fringe tree, red bud, Southern crab apple or tree sparkleberry.

If you do all this, in a couple of years you should have the beginning of a long-lived, low-maintenance green fence.

*Stan Rosenthal is an extension forestry agent for the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County. [Back]*