

The Seattle Times

AT HOME

IN THE NORTHWEST

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a living fence

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height advantage

Hedges provide backyard privacy, nesting sites for birds and more

BY ANNIE FANNING

Special to At Home in the Northwest

Generally less expensive and more eco-friendly than fencing, a fast-growing hedge is a popular solution for a privacy screen. But unlike most wood fences, a well-planted hedge won't need replacement after a couple of decades of wet winters.

While fences many fail in the long run, thoughtfully placed hedges continue to grow for years, offering natural beauty as well as potential nesting sites for songbirds, food for pollinators and other ecological benefits.

Using native shrubs and trees in mixed hedges might provide the most value for local wildlife, but even a single-species hedge can offer considerable support to birds and beneficial insects. Whether you decide to go all-in on one or mix it up, most native shrubs and trees do best when planted in the fall through early spring.

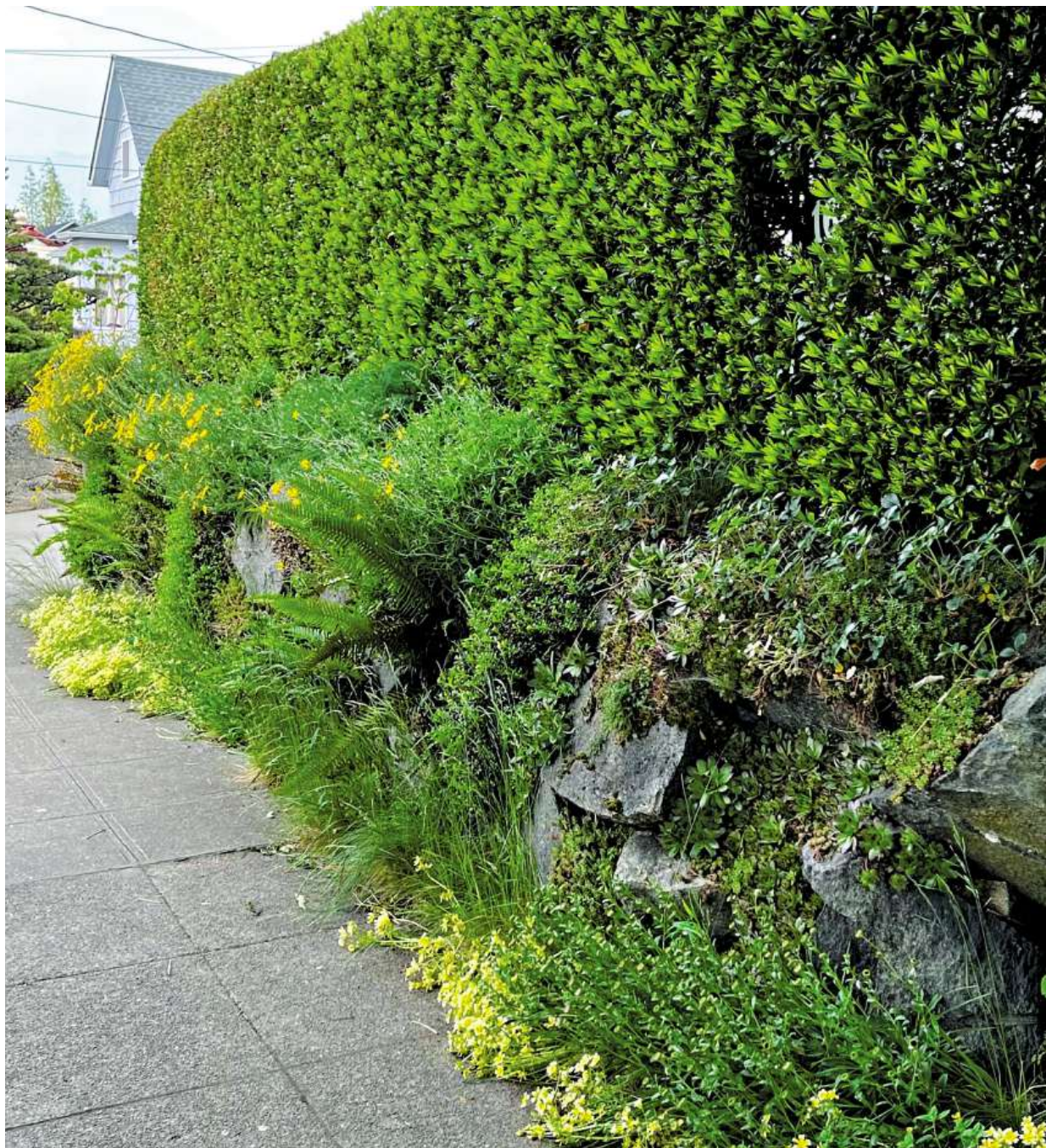
Before you hit the garden center, consider these expert recommendations for selecting native plants that are useful for privacy hedges, as well as those that are best avoided.

Break with tradition

If you want a fast-growing evergreen hedge, be aware that some historically popular choices are now problematic in the Pacific Northwest.

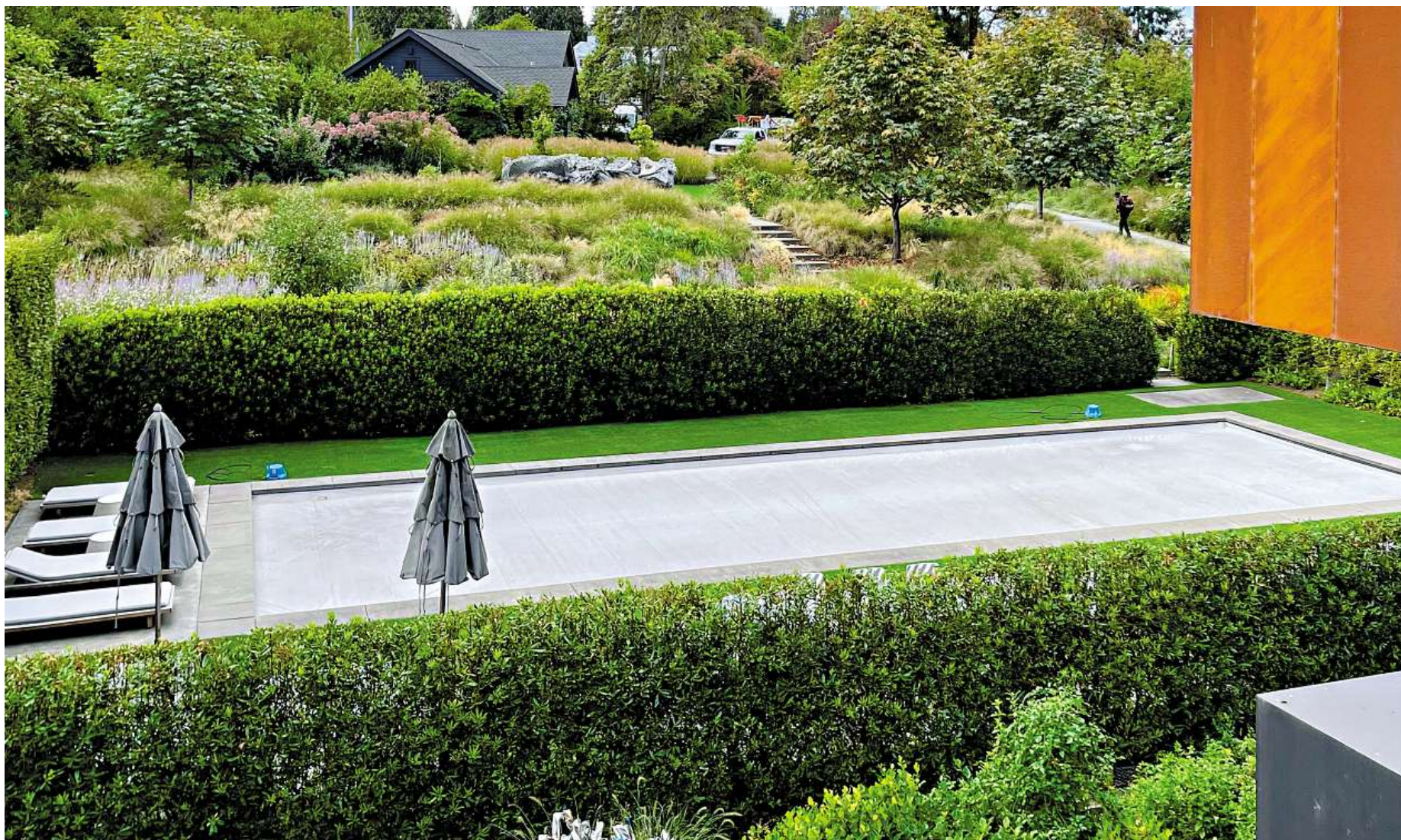
"My first rule for hedges: anything but laurel or boxwood," says Washington State University Extension Master Gardener Dana Niblack. "Laurel is becoming invasive, boxwood is struggling with disease, and both lock you into expensive ongoing pruning," explains Niblack, who is also a local landscape designer.

"It is almost impossible to talk about hedges without addressing the arborvitae problem," says Niblack's fellow WSU Extension Master Gardener, Molly van der Burch, referring to the popular evergreens known for their dense, flat, feathery foliage.



COURTESY OF SHANNON NICHOL

A hedge of *Myrica californica*, a native shrub commonly known as Pacific wax myrtle, tops a rockery along a Queen Anne sidewalk. Shannon Nichol, principal of Seattle landscape architecture firm GGN, says she values Pacific wax myrtle for the insect and bird habitat it provides.



COURTESY OF SHANNON NICHOL

The Pacific wax myrtle hedges at this Seattle-area residence offer privacy around the pool area while serving as a border for the larger, mostly native meadow garden behind.

Part of the genus *Thuja*, arborvitae are often used for hedges because they are readily available, grow quickly and provide immediate privacy. When planted too close together, however, these trees are more susceptible to drying out, especially as our local climate trends toward longer, hotter summers.

Not-so-fun fact about arborvitae: When they get insufficient water during the summer months, they start dying from the inside out. A volunteer for 17 years, van der Burch has seen her share of these sad die-offs in local gardens.

“Because of their oily needles and the tendency for the center of the tree to fill with dead, dry mate-



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Left: Tall Oregon grape flowers in the spring and makes a good hedge plant. **Right:** Vine maple (*Acer circinatum*) and native wood fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*) are surrounded by hedges in this Seattle yard.



COURTESY OF SHANNON NICHOL

rial, arborvitae are known as ‘plant torches’ by fire officials,” van der Burch says.

Should you choose to plant an arborvitae hedge, van der Burch recommends watering thor-

oughly throughout the dry season with drip or soaker hoses for the first several years. To reduce the threat

of fire, it’s also wise to plant these highly flammable hedges away from houses and other structures.

Hedging your bets? Try these varieties

Want to plant something lush and fast-growing to screen your property and give a lovely backdrop to your garden and outdoor spaces? Plant a hedge of *Myrica californica*, a native shrub commonly known as Pacific wax myrtle.

Shannon Nichol has planned many successful hedges using native plants during her career. She is the founding principal of GGN, the Seattle landscape architecture firm widely celebrated for stunning native plant gardens that feel both welcoming and significant. You may have encountered her work ►

at notable Seattle locales like the Gates Foundation campus and the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture.

Nichol is considered a master at “painting” with a native plant palette, as evident in the seasonal display of striking plumes of fireweed right now glowing fuchsia against the gray facade of the Burke along 15th Avenue.

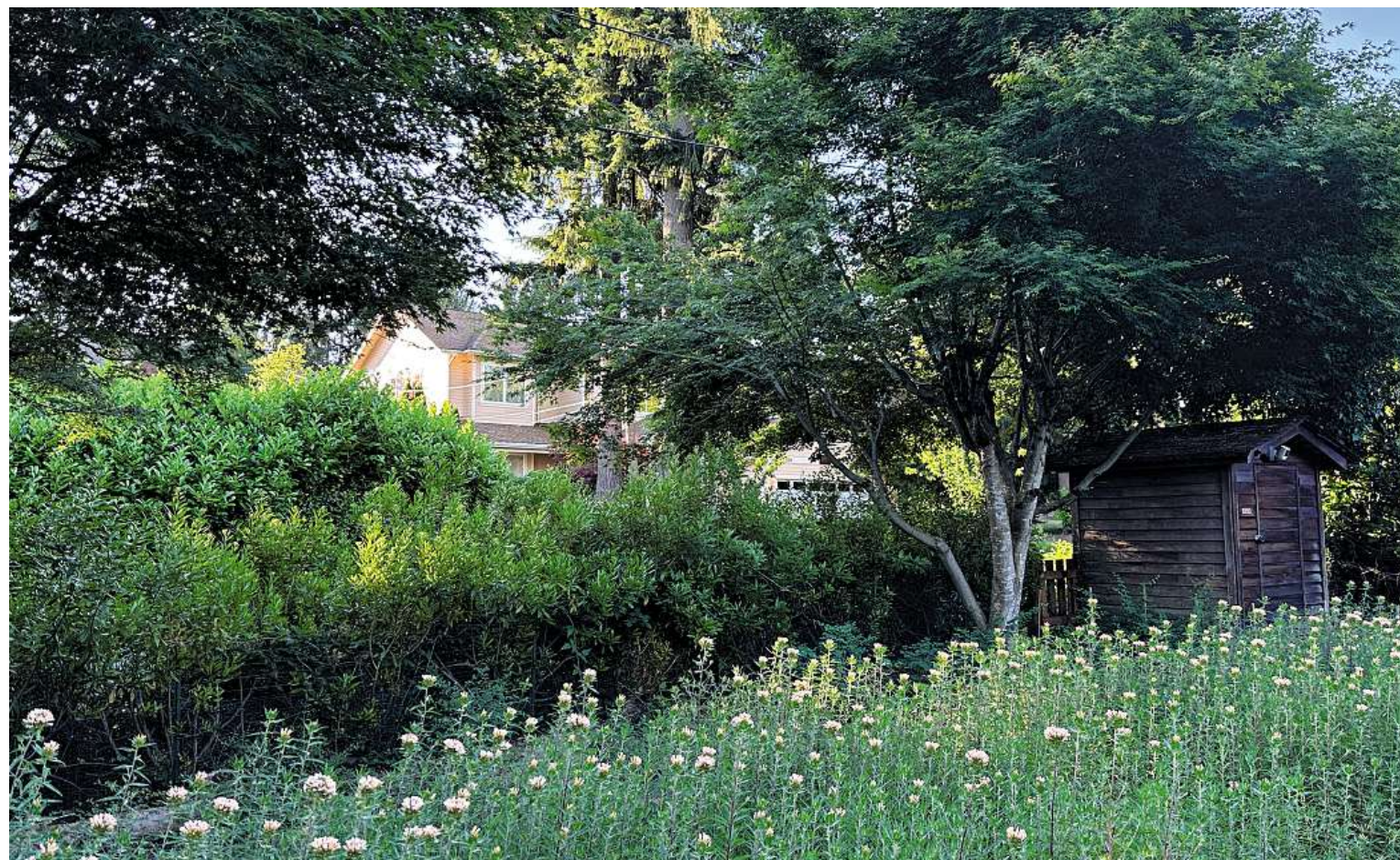
Nichol considers Pacific wax myrtle to be a solid choice for privacy hedges. She’s put them in her personal gardens and in her professional work as both single-species hedges and evergreen anchors in mixed hedges.

Pacific wax myrtle can take a good shearing. “It has a fast growth rate, and it also forms many small, dense branches at each place where you might cut a branch. This means that it will quickly form a solid surface around the profile that you choose to cut it into,” Nichol says.

For clipped hedges in the Seattle area, Pacific wax myrtle offers a lot of flexibility. “I’ve made tunnels through it, formal and informal shapes, and have subtly limbed it up and guided its shape from being a large, round willow-like shrub into a more lofty tree-form,” Nichol says. “It responds well to all of this.”

To maintain your Pacific wax myrtle hedge’s shape, Nichol says, you must prune or shear it at least once a year. “If you don’t get to it every year, your work — and the compost pile — is significant the next year,” she says.

Nichol also values Pacific wax myrtle for the insect and bird habitat it



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHANNON NICHOL

When left to grow, hedges will provide a great deal more privacy than a typical fence.

provides. “Yellow-rumped warblers forage on them for specific insects, and any jays or woodpeckers in your neighborhood will convene around the wax berries in the fall and early winter,” says Nichol.

WSU’s master gardeners are equally enthusiastic about Pacific wax myrtle, which thrives in full sun to part shade and responds well to Seattle soil conditions.

“It tolerates a wide range of soils, including poor soils, thanks to nitrogen-fixing bacteria associated with its roots,” says Niblack, who has used Pacific wax myrtle in her professional practice.

For her part, van der Burch notes that Pacific wax myrtle has a slim profile and a pleasant smell: its size works well in smaller urban gardens, while the foliage has a spicy herbal fragrance



Pacific wax myrtle thrives in full sun to part shade and responds well to Seattle soil conditions.

when it’s brushed against. She also gives it high marks for its clusters of dark purple berries.

For dry shade, consider native evergreen shrubs

Dry shade can really feel like a problem, particularly if you are in need of a privacy hedge. Luckily, there are solutions in the native plant pallet. One choice is a stalwart food source for wildlife but grows slowly in the garden: Evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*).

It can take years, but in favorable conditions, Evergreen huckleberry can grow 8 to 10 feet in height. In average conditions, expect close to 3 to 5 feet.

Both master gardeners we consulted praise this huckleberry for its evergreen foliage, bell-shaped

flowers adored by native bees and small edible berries beloved by birds. Evergreen huckleberry can thrive in poor, acidic soil under mature conifers, which Niblack says makes it a good choice for a drought-tolerant woodland garden. This native shrub needs very little water once established.

Another excellent native plant choice for a privacy hedge in dry shade is tall Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*). Less friendly and more of a natural deterrent, this native shrub grows up to about 6 feet (but can grow taller) and has prickly evergreen leaves. Niblack says it is appropriate for anywhere you want to both create a visual screen and discourage access. ■

Annie Fanning is a Seattle-based lifestyle writer.