

Homes & Real Estate

Originally published September 6, 2013 at 8:04 PM | Page modified September 7, 2013 at 8:31 AM

Surround yourself with eco-friendly fence

All the available choices of fencing materials can seem overwhelming, so let's take a quick tour, from a green perspective.

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

"Good fences make good neighbors." That old saying is debatable, but "green" fences certainly make good sense.

For any home project, we should consider environmental impacts when making decisions, along with the typical criteria such as price and appearance.

Because so many great options exist for eco-friendly projects, we can often save money and have a beautiful fence as well.

The greenest fence is actually the one that doesn't get built, since you conserve the most resources that way. Going fenceless sends a welcoming message.

You can also show your green side by taking down an unneeded fence and salvaging or recycling the materials.

Fences fit the bill, however, to protect privacy, keep small children and pets in the yard, or provide a decorative touch. All the available choices of fencing materials can seem overwhelming, so let's take a quick tour, from a green perspective.

Salvaged materials

Pros: Greenest choice. Usually inexpensive or even free. Perfect for quirky, arty fence projects.

Cons: Often difficult to find the right used materials in the quantity you need. May require substantial work to make materials usable, such as wire brushing and painting old wrought iron.

Tip: Cannibalize your own yard projects and junk, and visit local used building materials stores for additional materials and advice.

Wood

Pros: Nice fit for Northwest yards. Sustainably harvested lumber increasingly available.

Cons: May discolor or rot fairly quickly without regular treatments with potentially toxic stains, paints or sealants. Researching greenest, safest treatment products can be challenging and frustrating.

Tip: Choose lumber with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) logo, produced in the Northwest if possible.

Metal

Pros: Wide range of choices, from lightweight, low-maintenance aluminum to durable, elegant-looking wrought iron. Highly recyclable and reusable.

Cons: Expensive, and needs painting or chemical treatments to avoid rust and flaking (wrought iron). Can be cheap-looking (steel chain-link).

Tip: Get agreement within your household to make sure the metal-fence look is right for you.

Stone and brick

Pros: Sturdy (solid brick or stone fence is really a wall). Abundant supplies in Seattle area.

Cons: Heavy and hard on your back. Time-consuming to work with, whether using mortar or going mortarless.

Tip: Always consider salvaged brick or stone first.

Plastic and plastic composites

Pros: Requires little maintenance. May contain recycled plastic. Newer products including composites (plastic mixed with other materials, such as wood), which are generally more durable than past plastic-fencing products.

Cons: Some types pricey. Not easily recyclable at end of life, though some plastic fencing products claim to be.

Tip: Choose cheap plastic fencing only for specialized uses such as keeping deer out.

Bamboo

Pros: Elegant, natural look. Can use homegrown or local bamboo if grown and harvested with fence construction in mind. Lightweight.

Cons: May discolor or deteriorate after a few years.

Tip: Bamboo-fence making is an art form, so read several books or articles before you even start your project.

Combined materials

Pros: Distinctive (wood rails with brick pillars, for example). Can make inclusion of salvaged or green materials easier.

Cons: Adds to complexity of job. Often expensive to build.

Tip: Develop a combo fence project utilizing green materials you already have on hand.

Living fence

Pros: Most natural solution (using plants or trees for screening). Attractive. Changes with the seasons.

Cons: Takes several years to fill in. Certain common screening plants, such as English laurel, are

glorified weeds.

Tip: (Via King County native plants expert Greg Rabourn.) Plant an attractive, dense “hedgerow” by mixing evergreen plants such as tall Oregon grape and California wax myrtle with deciduous (shedding leaves in the fall) species like red elderberry and Pacific ninebark.

A multitude of resources for the DIY fence builder are available online or at the library or bookstore. For elaborate fencing projects, ask a knowledgeable friend for help, or choose a contractor with lots of fences under his or her toolbelt.

September is the perfect time for your green fence project, before the heavy rains come. And just as the Seahawks are proud of their defense, you’ll be proud of “de fence” at your home, too.

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