

# HAPPY HEDGES

---

By Ralph E. Mitchell

When I look around Charlotte County, I seldom see a truly happy hedge. Many hedges are out of shape, have dead areas, or have been pruned totally backwards. The ornamental feature of a hedge is never realized if the bottom section is leafless and can be seen through. While maintaining a sturdy useful hedge starts from planting time, many older hedges can be rejuvenated and brought back into a usefully ornamental feature in your landscape. What makes a happy hedge?

Hedge plant material selection is often as much a matter of taste as it is in consideration of the planting site. How high do you want the hedge? Are you looking more for a flowering hedge or just one featuring ornamental foliage? Do you want a hedge that is clipped to geometric perfection or a more informal look? Also consider the site conditions such as sun or shade, well drained or moist soil, etc. Once a selection of plant material is made, review the size of the plants available and how many you will need. Depending on the size of plant that you begin with, and how quickly you want the plants to grow together to form a hedge, planting distances will vary. Placing of the shrubs used to make the hedge may be in single or double rows or even in a staggered zigzag pattern. Once established, two rules should be followed: (1) Trim hedges while the new growth is green and succulent; and (2) Prune so that the bottom of the hedge is wide and the top is narrow. Keeping the bottom of the hedge wide and the top narrow is essential to the success of the hedge. Many hedges, for one reason or

another, are pruned backwards with the bottom narrow and the top wide. Inappropriate pruning sets the hedge up for a slow decline as this shape keeps the sun from getting to all parts of the hedge equally. This results in weak growth and hardly any leaves on the bottom portion of the hedge. As an aid to pruning, and to keep the desired trapezoid shape without having to guess, simply drive in two stakes at each end of the hedge on a slight angle and string guide wires or cords to provide an outline. Trim off the excess growth that extends beyond the guide wires by heading back or thinning out entire branches as needed. Also keep in mind that by pruning too much or at the wrong time of year, flowers and flower buds may be cut off, delaying or eliminating blooms.

Are your old hedges looking tired and are not providing privacy? Your hedge may be a candidate for rejuvenation. Rejuvenation has the potential to bring an old worn out hedge back into some line of usefulness. Rejuvenation is a several-year process carried out depending on the type of shrubs the hedge is made from. A single-stemmed shrub such as a ligustrum is worked by removing one-third to one-half of the old growth each year over a period of two to three years. Shrubs that have many stems are rejuvenated by removing, over a period of three years, all stems to the ground level. This is accomplished by pruning out one-third of the old stems the first year. This is followed the next year by removing one-half of the remaining oldest stems. Reduce the length or head back any long shoots which grew from last years pruning. The third

year, all of the old wood left is pruned out and any new shoots that are out of bounds can be shortened. Generally, the process of

rejuvenation is best completed in late winter or early spring.

---

Pruning and maintaining hedges is as much an art as a science and may take some practice to perfect. Regardless, there is no excuse for a sparse or see-through hedge! For more information on all types of pruning woody plant information, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm until 4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our **Plant Clinics** are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** every Thursday from 9:00am until 11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 10:00am-1:00pm every Thursday (starting October 4<sup>th</sup>).
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of month from 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 1<sup>st</sup> Saturday of month.
- **Peachland Promenades Publix** - 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** - 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by e-mail ([Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com](mailto:Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com)). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by e-mail ([Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com](mailto:Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com)).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

---

*Resource: Gilman, E. F. & Black, R. J. (2005) Pruning Landscape Trees and Shrubs. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.*