

# Ask our EXPERTS

We know you have plenty of questions just waiting to be answered. As always, Michigan Home Resource Guide is here to help. As your trusted source for all information relating to the Michigan home, we have enlisted three extremely knowledgeable Michigan business leaders to answer your questions. Simply send us your questions and we will provide the answers either on our Web site or in our next issue. It's that simple. We invite you to ask our experts—you will be glad you did. □



Scott Philp

Q:

I have a large yard, but would like to create a privacy screen with landscaping. I don't want fences and I don't want to just line up trees along the perimeter. What should I plant, how should I plant them, and do I need to change the grade to do this?

Thank you,  
Tim from Plainfield, MI

**A:** Tim: Your situation is very common—great question. Given the fact that you do not want to line trees up, I presume that you will be seeking a natural look, not a formal border. Plainfield is a “Zone 5” on the USDA plant hardiness map, which means that you can only install plants that are hardy to zone 5 or less.

Changing the grade depends on your site and how natural you want to make your privacy screen. The more contour you desire, the more fill you will need to achieve this. Fill can be either relocated on your site (if you have a high spot or want to cut into a hill) or brought in with equipment. Fill must contain organic matter. Remember, you will create some fill when you dig the holes for your trees you are planting. If you do decide to change grade, be sure that you make your berm wide enough so that the water does not run off too quickly. A flat top and gradually sloping sides will also give roots room to grow as well. Boulders or ledgestone can be installed in the hill and made to look like Mother Nature has exposed them over time.

The height of trees you will install depends on your budget. The most cost effective way to install a privacy screen is by hand, with a friend. Two people can install a tree with a burlapped root ball up to 32 inches in diameter with a nursery tool called a “ball cart” and hand shovels. These trees are typically 6 feet in height or less, if they are evergreens. A 32-inch ball on a deciduous tree will yield a 6- to 12-foot tree. Larger trees can be planted with equipment, either rented or hired.

The overall design of your privacy screen is very personal. If you wish to have constant privacy, you will be using evergreen trees (spruce, pine, fir, cedar, etc.). Deciduous trees (those that lose their leaves) are commonly used for their spring flowers, fall color and ornate branching patterns. You can easily turn a privacy screen into a landscape bed by adding perennial flowers. A typical natural privacy screen would consist of taller evergreens in the back (varying heights and species), deciduous trees in front of them (some shade trees, some flowering ornamentals), and shrubs/perennial flowers in the front of the bed. Make sure that you layer your trees (largest in the rear, shortest in the front). This look mimics a natural wood line. All plants should be staggered, nothing should line up. Sun exposure should be considered and all plants should be well-suited for the space.

Plant species can vary widely in a privacy screen, especially with deciduous material. If you are a year-round resident, you can install spring flowering shrubs (serviceberry, viburnum, lilac, etc.) or summer flowering ornamentals (Kousa dogwood, ivory silk lilac tree, rose of Sharon, etc.) Fall color can be achieved from a token autumn blaze maple, for example. If you are adding a screen to your summer residence, be sure to select deciduous varieties that flower only then.

The front bed edge of a natural privacy screen is typically curved. Make sure that the edge is a flowing line and can be easily mowed along. Privacy screens should be anchored at each end by something large (a house, shed, etc. or an existing tree). If no anchors are pres-

ent, be sure to plant your largest two trees at opposite ends.

Be sure to consider area wildlife when selecting plant material. Talk to local professionals on what plants animals eat. Nothing is more frustrating than having animals eating your newly installed plants.

Irrigation is an essential element when planting a privacy screen. If a system is not present, I highly recommend installing a drip system consisting of half-inch pipe on top of the ground (under the mulch) and use drip nozzles (called emitters) off that hose to water the trees. This system can be attached to a garden hose and run for an hour or so. Remember: Plants need a little amount of water over a long period of time. If you run the hose on a large tree for 1 minute, most of the water will run off and the tree may die from drought. Trees will establish typically after 2 years and the system can be shut down.

Privacy screens can be tailored to any taste and budget. With proper planning and installation, they will provide you with years of not only privacy, but color as well. A great resource for plant material hardy to the Midwest is [www.msuplants.com](http://www.msuplants.com).

Scott Philp

Scott Philp has a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture from Michigan State University. He is also a state-certified pesticide applicator, and a member of the Michigan Green Industry Association, and the Michigan Nursery and Landscape Association. Philp uses these professional memberships to stay on the leading edge of evolving trends in the landscape industry. He believes that education is extremely important in providing the best service and product available. Philp is the owner of Landscape Logic, a Charlevoix-based company serving all of Northern Michigan. He uses his extensive background in horticulture and stone construction to create truly unique outdoor spaces for his clients.

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