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grow

From old skis to steel panels, fencing gets a facelift

By Colleen Smith

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"Don't ever take a fence down until you know why it was put up."

— Robert Frost

Fences serve many purposes: keeping pets in or people out, providing privacy, defining margins, protecting a vegetable garden, screening an eyesore or framing a view.

"A fence creates edges for the garden," said Eric Crotty, a Denver-based landscape architect. "A fence contributes to the character of your home as seen by yourself and other people. It's such a public component that affects the street and your neighbors."

Wendy Booth of Ivy Street Designs said, "Fences are superimportant. They're visible 12 months of the year. Fences form the walls of the outdoor room, and we spend a lot of time outside in Colorado, even in winter, so you don't want ugly walls."

Homeowners are departing from marking boundaries with the once-ubiquitous chain-link or standard stockade fences fashioned of dog-eared cedar. Front Range gardeners have

constructed fences using everything from tempered glass to old skis.

"A lot more people are using raw steel panels with an industrial character," Crotty said.

"Vertical steel panels are allowed to rust, or some have finished steel with a sandblasted surface texture. And some of these are used in conjunction with a regular wooden picket fence."

Tempered-glass panes mounted with stainless-steel brackets to stainless-steel posts offer another alternative for partitioning a property.

"It's a great way to maximize a view. It's very clean looking," said Crotty. "It gives rigidity you need for windbreaks."

Other enclosure options include metal framework with Plexiglas. Heavy fabric panels made of canvas or sailcloth strung on cable can create a visual barrier that's softer in appearance. Strung like curtains, fabric panels can open or close, so the barrier can create temporary privacy or expose a view. However, these panels don't offer the same physical barrier as more orthodox fencing.

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white picket fence, but that quaint item is out of place for most houses. Figuring out which fence works best for a property involves several



An unconventional wood and masonry fence at a home on Green Court in northwest Denver. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

considerations, Booth says.

"The ultimate goals, the budget and the architecture of the house informs us about how to work out details of a fence," said Booth, who served as the first female president of Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado.

Crotty also emphasized the importance of architectural harmony between a dwelling and a fence. "You have to consider not only the house and its surroundings but also the neighborhood as a whole," said Crotty.

"We are stewards in our homes. We are in them only for a time. If I make careful choices, my home and my neighborhood as a whole make a greater contribution to the city," he said.

"If you live in a bungalow or a Mission-style home, look for fencing solutions of the same character. A fence — like any other decorative or functional component of your home — should tie into the overall esthetic," said Crotty. "Oftentimes, people fail to achieve that, primarily due to a lack of knowledge."

Budget also figures in fence decisions. "More

customized means more cost," Crotty said.

Crotty designed a customized fence for the Anchor Center for Blind Children. The fence defines the center's outdoor area. "They have preschoolers, so the play space has to be contained. I designed the fence to conform to



The patio fencing at the California contemporary home of designer Peter Blank incorporates metal and wood, adding an industrial character. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

code but also to provide lessons for a visually-challenged person's experience in the garden."

Crotty used three separate panels, each with three sizes of wood slats. The panels repeat but alternate. The variety of openings changes the shadow patterns. "It's very unique — a play of



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light and shadow," Crotty said. "And if you run a cane along the fence, the sound changes."

A more common, yet still edgy fencing trend uses horizontally mounted boards. Crotty said, "These usually have a steel structure and use very high-end wood that's highly finished. It's used on both sides of the fence, so nobody has the back."

Crotty cautioned that these fences don't afford optimum privacy.

And wrought-iron fences offer even less. "Wrought iron or painted steel gives no privacy but acts as a decorative barrier that defines spaces and creates a decorative edge," Crotty said. "These fences are classic and a very formal approach to defining the yard."

Shaped into undulating vines or other plant shapes, some iron or steel fences approach the stature of sculpture while still keeping what's inside in, and what's outside out.

Crotty warned against attempting living fences made of trees or shrubs too. "The junipers planted closely together works really well on the East Coast, but in Colorado, one challenge is dieback at the base of the shrub. Depending on orientation, it can be tricky," he said.

He gives a thumbs down to Austrian firs, as well: "They get out of scale and look like Hershey's Kisses."

Crotty uses yews as fences, but only on the north side — and even then these evergreens can be temperamental shields. "In our relatively dry environment, it takes longer for this sort of barrier to become opaque," Crotty said.

Living fences are ideal dividers within fenced spaces, where a see-through quality is OK. To define space within space, lower fencing divides space and provides function. "Maybe you have to fence a pool or create a dog run," Crotty said.

Yet another rising trend in fencing is the vegetal wall. The market now includes a number of products to create vertical gardens.

Booth reminded homeowners of legal matters to handle before erecting any fence or wall.

"Fences almost always require a permit," she said, adding that homeowners should check a plot plan and make sure fences are within property lines.

"And you can't build a fence over a certain height in Denver," she said. "If the fence is going to be taller, you need a variance."

Check with your municipality for fence parameters.

As for fencing the front of the house, "Our philosophy in the U.S. is an open front yard," Booth said. "It's a symbol of our interpretation of a democratic society and what it means to be American."

Colleen Smith is the author of "Glass Halo"—a novel selected as a finalist for the Santa Fe Literary Prize — available at Denver bookstores and on Amazon.com.

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fencing, you can dress up the dreary.

"Fences are often a big expense," said Wendy Booth of Ivy Street Designs, "but people don't want to invest in them the way they might invest in interior walls, so they have ugly fences."

If your fence is less than fancy or your budget hems you in, Booth and landscape architect Eric Crotty suggest:

Typical stockade fence — Alternate panels. "Have both the front and back side exposed," Crotty said. "On the side with exposed rails, you can use wire mesh or stakes to train vines that create a more finished side with plant material. This gives you the best of both worlds and gives an individual character so the fence becomes more your fence."

Chain link fence — Booth and Crotty recommend clematis as a decorative vine that's relatively well-behaved. Booth also suggested honeysuckle, and Crotty uses climbing roses to camouflage less-attractive fences.

— *Colleen Smith*

Keeping up appearances

Fences are particularly vulnerable to Colorado's harsh sunlight and temperature swings.

"It depends on the type of fence, but you're blessed if you get 10 years out of it," said Eric Crotty. "Fence posts rot quickly around here."

Fence tips from the experts:

- Wood posts should be exposed at the base of any concrete collar to allow water to drain, Crotty said, noting that boards also tend to rot around nails, staples or screws.
- Keep irrigation off cedar fences to avoid discoloration. Put plants adjacent to the fence on drip irrigation.

- Though masonry fences cost the most, they're also the most durable and easy to maintain.

- Be careful about allowing vines to grow directly on a fence. Virginia creeper, English ivy, euonymus and trumpet vines can topple a fence with their weight or pop boards by wending between slats. Vines with invasive tendrils can damage or destroy mortar in masonry fences.

- When is it time to replace a fence? "When it's falling into the yard, or when maintenance outweighs aesthetics," Crotty said.

— *Colleen Smith*

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