THE USE OF THE HEDGE

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HEDGES might be described as that formality of green growth most nearly related to architecture. Indeed, there is so very fine a line between their artificially produced form and proportion and that of an architectural detail that practically they may be thought of as part of the general architectural scheme. It is the meeting-point of architecture and the green world—one of the instances where Nature, harnessed to civilization, does not lose in value. We might compare the hedge to the magic—though artificial—touch which transforms the great forest tree, with all its freedom of growth and beauty of line, into a splendidly wrought column, so full of proportion and dignity that the sisters of the forest, from which it came, might almost envy it.

The hedge is essentially artificial in its original treatment and also in its preservation, and left untouched for a short period, goes back with amazing alacrity to the freer growth which the Lord intended.

Let us begin with our low flower-bed borders, our box and our barberry, and think of them as hedges. They are the little ones, and they creep up in size to those which we look over—which are of enormous use—and to those which are higher than ourselves; and then we begin to think of the stately hedges of box and holly in Scotland and England, and the wonderful yew and ilex hedges which we find in Italy—the backgrounds for the statues; the enclosures for the amphitheatres; the protecting walls behind which romance and intrigue have been born and cardinals have walked.

The hedge is no upstart; it has accentuated scenes of splendor from the earliest times of planting. It has lent itself as gracefully to the merrymakings of the maze as to the gardens of the Roman Emperors.

The great note of all the famous villas of Italy—so wonderful in their outline and proportion that no flowers are needed to make them gardens—is the perfect harmony of idea between the architectural details of steps, pools, and pathways and the walls formed by hedges.

The use of the hedge is a very valuable asset which came into existence as civilization advanced to the point where man first grasped the idea of privacy and individuality about his home. In the very earliest records of gardens there are illustrations of the hedge in the quaintest perspective.
The hedge is an accent, first and foremost, and its purpose is either a background or a barrier. Being artificial, it of necessity should be planted in relation to architecture—that term being used to denote the formalities of garden or parterre arrangement as well as of the buildings proper. A hedge must have a purpose, just as much as a balustrade or a flight of steps; it must be in proportion to its environment, just as much as the house or its garden. It should be looked upon, where it is used as a background, purely as a flat surface against which the informal growth of flowers or the moving figures of people are accentuated. When considered in the larger scheme, where trees in the distance and the perspective of diminishing lines are seen in relation to it, its own sharp outline becomes an important factor. Therefore, two uses are found in the same hedge: in relation to smaller things it is a background, and in relation to larger things, an accent. When planted in front of old trees, the hedge makes in its contrast, in rigidity of form, a note so firm and controlled as to accentuate the freedom of growth in the trees. It lends a note of variety while suggesting an important one in composition.

As a barrier, the hedge is of practical use and more pleasing to the eye than any other form of fencing. Its most important use is found when planted in front of the houses on a village street. It gives to the street itself, as does nothing else, a style in composition; and from the owner’s view within the grounds it makes the place seem larger and more important by cutting off the highway as well as providing a background.

When service-wings of houses lie in close proximity to the garden or terrace, and privacy must be secured though there is limited space, the hedge is of great advantage, as a strip of land from four to six feet wide is all that is needed to screen off that part of the house and to create a background for the terrace or the garden.

In the plantings of gardens, clipped blocks of hedge may be introduced for the purpose of accent or contrast at the crossing of paths and sides of gateways, or
other blocks as backgrounds for seats or fountains. Niches for the placing of statues are frequently found abroad cut into the surface of the hedge and are sometimes carried out in this country with marked success. In the bounding of terraces, where used alone or planted behind a balustrade, a hedge is always dignified, and an important note.

There is a prevalent idea that hedges require great time and care in this country where very high wages are to be considered, but anyone who has had them knows that for what they lend in effect they take comparatively little time. If a hedge is well kept from the beginning, three to six clippings a year are all that are required for the most vigorous. We spend an infinitely greater proportion of time on vast extent of lawns, in relation to the amount of pleasure we derive from them. If there is to be any choice in the things which require labor, do without some unnecessary areas of lawn which take weekly attention, and give a fraction of that labor to hedges.

Climbing roses, if not allowed too much liberty in their growth, make a wonderfully lovely hedge when grown over some artificial support of the shape and height required. Hornbeam, cherry, dogwood, laburnum, arborvitae and dozens of other small trees lend themselves easily to being bent into the form of hedge-like arbors, and with so delightful an effect, that one wonders the charming sense of frolic and surprise is not more sought after by us all. Why are we so contented to pass from one scheme of arrangement to another through barren treatment, when it takes but a hedged-in walk to give us the sensation of a marked place-apart, and makes all the difference in the world in the overlapping interests to be gained by a bit of imagination?

Is there nothing more to be desired in the formal approach to a garden than a gravel path, flanked with the neatly kept turf-edging of a lawn? The path, it is true, is the only bare necessity; but is that all we have to consider? Suppose the path is looked upon as but the backbone of the approach, and we add a broad hedge of great height on either hand, perhaps so planted that three to six feet of margin are left on each side of the pathway for shade-loving flowers? We thus create shadows, a mossy path, an invitation for birds, an increased sense of distance, a vanishing point in perspective, an added lovable feature about our home; and the pathway
has been made a romantic introduction of shade between two interesting open spaces. Children grown to men and women fifty years after will remember the spot with a glow of mystery and pleasure, whereas the barren, well-kept path would be quite forgotten. If a pathway for some reason should not be bordered by a high unbroken line of this kind, it can be flanked by regularly or irregularly planted shrubs, placed as far apart as desired. Cedars, dwarf fruits, thorns, or poplars all form beautiful path-margins of a broken formal type. In England I remember a wonderful hedge on either side of a wide grass-path joining an artist’s studio, which was built on the edge of a little wooded piece of land, and his garden, which was by his house some distance away. The path lay in a graceful curve through a grain-field terminating at the studio door. The hedge was formed of sweetbriar rose, kept clipped to a rounded top, standing about four to five feet high. The perfume from the young shoots was pungent and delightful as one passed along the path, and the ripening grain, seen on either side of it, made a fine waving background for the bright green color and formal outline of the hedge.

Clipped perpendicular walls of hedge can be made when a pathway should be introduced through tall swamp- or wild wooded-growth. By introducing a dense natural planting of high-bush blueberry, clethra, the various viburnums and thorns, wild roses, azaleas, barberry, and spice-bush, and by constantly cutting their growth to a true vertical line on each side of the path, a tall and interesting enclosure for a green walk can be formed in a few years. The constant pruning induces a vigor of growth on the face of the green wall which is very beautiful. A consistent choice of natural plants can in this way create a feature leading from one important point to another. The setting of a house, for instance, can—with no false introduction of planting—be connected with an equally architectural garden or tennis court, through a stretch of natural woodland which demands some continuity of treatment.

When entrances through hedges are to be cut in semicircular or “vaulted” arches, it is well to have a frame made of the desired shape and have the hedge-opening cut by this frame year after year. Curved lines when left to the accuracy of the eye are not true, and the general outline suffers in consequence. Our old, much abused friend, the privet, is so inexpensive and so dependable that no one is left with an excuse for going without a hedge wherever one can be tucked in. Arborvitae, buckthorn, hemlock, hornbeam, barberry, beech, and some of the viburnums are more to be desired when one’s choice alone is to be considered. Nothing is more tranquil than the quality of green form which good hedge-pruning gives to a composition, and it is far better to have a thousand feet of privet than a few hundred feet of some rarer hedge. The composition comes first and the material used, second, in the importance of hedges.

From *The Spirit of the Garden*, 1923.