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OVER THE GARDEN WALL



A wall of horizontal lpe wood slats lightens a base of Cor-ten steel in a garden by Janet Rosenberg and Associates. Both materials are extremely durable and will weather beautifully over time. JACKIE BEALE/JRA

# Modernism moves outdoors

It's time to drag your garden into the 21st century. Creating walls with contemporary materials not only enhances privacy, but also adds architectural interest and creates the illusion of space, writes **Marjorie Harris**



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Until a few years ago, if you spoke of modernism and Canadian gardens in the same sentence, you'd get a blank stare. We love our plants, and modernist gardens seem so stark, geometric and planless.

But if you've secretly wanted to bring your garden into the 21st century, then Janet Rosenberg, one of Canada's leading landscape architects, can show the way ([www.jrala.ca](http://www.jrala.ca)).

The modernist garden that leaps to mind has elegant, simple, articulate lines, with a vibrant use of materials. That would certainly describe Rosenberg's and her colleague Glenn Herman's gardens, both public (Toronto's HTO waterfront park or Calgary's Devonian Garden) and private (they have projects in almost every city in the country).

Now that contemporary interior design has been embraced by the mainstream, Rosenberg says, designers are pushing for the same restraint and elegance out of doors. And in cities where small gardens are the norm and there has been an explosion of condo-living, we need privacy. We need to

cut out noise and we need to control what we look at. Ergo, the insertion of walls and screens into our gardens.

"It's about updating how we live inside the garden," Rosenberg says. "We are living outside differently now because we really are living outside instead of just talking about it. We see the garden two ways: looking out to it, but also looking at it from within."

Walls and screens can create separate areas, act as edges, or manipulate the topography. And they are, according to Rosenberg and Herman, the best way to bring your garden up to date. There is still a place for the old-fashioned, big square trellis smothered in vines, but the new trends dictate much simpler lines.

What modernism suggests to Rosenberg is something that is both a bit harder (the materials) and a bit softer (the plants). Modernism has always been inspired by new materials. Metals, glass and new plastics such as 3form's ecoresin ([www.3-form.com](http://www.3-form.com)) all present exciting new possibilities in garden design. But Rosenberg warns: It is absolutely crucial to have a master plan, a vision so that it all fits together.

Even the woods we use have changed. "We've moved a long, long way from railway ties to hold back trulent soil," Rosenberg says. Now a retaining wall can be made from lpe (pronounced "ee-pay"), a Central American wood that is

harder than cedar and lasts for 40 or 50 years. It's so tough holes need to be pre-drilled, and the lovely light brown colour, which doesn't need oiling, will slowly silver out over many years.

Then there's Lucite, which captures the changing light. Such high-tech materials focus the eye on a view so that you want to gaze at the material as it changes from hour to hour and subtle details are revealed.

At Toronto's Earth Inc. ([www.earthinc.com](http://www.earthinc.com)), senior designer Lorne Hancock favours the translucent blue of walls made from sandblasted tempered glass, or the natural elegance of Cor-ten steel, which rusts on the surface and then stops. "With age," Hancock says, "just like us, it weathers to a beautiful patina."

Screens can also be made from high-gauge galvanized wire (like Earth Inc.'s wire wall shown on our cover), wooden slats or lightweight Lucite.

"People are becoming more and more design-savvy," Hancock says, "and that gives us the opportunity to work with new and different materials."

Even outdoors, walls make a space feel like a room. "We pull houses apart, take down walls and put them back up in different places," Rosenberg says. "Well, now we're doing the same thing in gardens. It all depends on what the space is being used for. Walls in the garden can be divisions or even a focus point."

Generally, the lower the wall, the less intrusive it will be; the higher it is, the more of a statement it becomes.

Rosenberg's designs always start with what is already there. If a garage wall can be used, they build around that as a focal point. In some cases, a retaining wall will be extended upward above the grade so that it becomes more important. It can be used to manipulate the topography and make it flat to create a terrace, or to straighten out an angle.

A wall can also provide privacy. For instance, Rosenberg and Herman had one client whose neighbour had an above-grade hot tub.

"We put up a 2.1-metre wall with the neighbour's consent," Herman says. "The wall has rosettes with water spouts mounted into the client's side. The sound of the water masks noise on the other side and the wall totally blocks out the hot tub without being overwhelming."

It is finished off with trees, creating a feeling of being in a courtyard. But, the designers warn, building walls like this is like building a house: They need deep footings and complicated construction and are expensive.

An alternative is to use screens. Again, the rules here are "a bit harder and a bit softer." Herman and Rosenberg sometimes use steel screens fronted by ornamental grasses.

Or imagine a large wooden screen with horizontal slats, with a single Japanese maple or another gorgeous specimen plant in front of it.

Screens can be incredibly useful in a garden, but you have to decide just how much you want to block out and what it will be used for. Is it to hide an air conditioner or create a child's area? Carve out a place to eat? Or create some definition within the garden? A screen can go along a wall or be above it in a hard-edge horizontal pattern that blocks out ugly visuals but allows in light.

It could be even more dramatic. Rosenberg once installed a glass screen 1.5 metres high and nine metres long to block out a bad view from a condo balcony. A screen could be used as a backdrop for a piece of sculpture (which, the designers say, always needs a context or backdrop).

But in all of the rush of putting in a new screen or a lovely big wall, where are the plants? They seem to be relegated to providing a soft element rather than a central focus. I, for one, love the lean lines of contemporary design. Still, no matter what, I'd want to stuff it full of plants. Very un-modernist of me.

|| Marjorie Harris is editor-at-large of Gardening Life magazine and the author of How to Make a Garden: The 7 Essential Steps for Canadian Gardeners (Random House Canada). [www.marjorie-harris.com](http://www.marjorie-harris.com).

## Material gains

### ECORESIN

Some of the most exciting new materials are environmentally friendly, such as ecoresin by 3form ([www.3-form.com](http://www.3-form.com)), a translucent sheeting that is 40 times the strength of glass and comes in gorgeous rich colours.

SLATS Horizontal strips of wood have a much more modern feel than traditional vertical fencing. Combining wood screens with greenery is an elegant way of blocking unwanted views without sacrificing light.

STEEL Slabs of Cor-ten or "atmospheric steel" make rustic, minimalist barriers. Over time, the surface rusts to a natural patin.

GLASS Sandblasted, tempered glass in translucent blues and whites will make your garden literally glow without competing with the plants. The material is also shatterproof.

LUCITE Lightweight, shatterproof and unobtrusive, sheets of this opaque acrylic softly filter natural light. It is particularly effective as a backing for wooden slats.

GALVANIZED WIRE Mesh screens made from heavy gauge wire add architectural interest and provide a support system for vines and other climbing plants.



Above, lpe slats overlaid on plexiglass by Janet Rosenberg and Associates. Top left, sandblasted glass panels installed by Earth Inc. Bottom left, horizontal slat walls by Earth Inc. create a sense of calm and space.