

Guide to evergreen bushes & shrubs to plant in front of a garden fence

This is a comprehensive selection of hardy, free-standing evergreen shrubs and bushes available in the UK. These have been chosen specifically because they do not require fence support, offer year-round leaf coverage, provide varied colours, and are excellent for local wildlife.

1. Wildlife Superstars (Berries & Security)

- **Pyracantha (Firethorn):** A tough shrub with glossy leaves and sharp spines (great for security). It features clouds of white flowers in spring and masses of **vibrant red, orange, or yellow berries** in winter that are a favourite for blackbirds and thrushes.
- **Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*):** A British classic with waxy, spiny leaves. It is a "fantastic choice" for security and provides **essential red berries** and dense nesting shelter for birds during the winter.
- **Berberis (Barberry):** Often described as "living barbed wire" due to its thorny stems, it offers masses of spring flowers followed by **blue or red berries** in autumn. Varieties like *Berberis darwinii* have beautiful orange flowers and dark evergreen leaves.

2. Fragrant & Winter-Flowering

- **Viburnum tinus:** One of the hardest-working shrubs for UK gardens. It has dense, dark green foliage and produces **clusters of pink buds that open to white flowers** for months (November to May), followed by dark blue-black berries.
- **Osmanthus (e.g., *O. delavayi* or *O. burkwoodii*):** A dependable evergreen with neat, charcoal-green leaves. In spring, it is covered in small white flowers with a **powerful jasmine-like fragrance** that can be smelled from around a corner.
- **Sarcococca confusa (Sweet Box):** A compact, shade-loving shrub with glossy leaves. In the depths of winter, it produces tiny white flowers with an **intense, honey-like scent**.

3. Striking Foliage & Colour

- **Photinia 'Red Robin':** Famous for its **brilliant red new leaf growth** in spring, which eventually matures to a glossy dark green. It is fast-growing and creates a very dense, colourful screen.
- **Spotted Laurel (*Aucuba japonica*):** Perfect for dark corners, its large, leathery leaves are **splashed with gold markings**, making it appear to "glow" in the shade.
- **Griselinia littoralis:** Offers a very fresh look with **apple-green, leathery leaves**. It is fast-growing and naturally upright, making it ideal for creating a narrow screen that doesn't take up too much garden width.
- **Pittosporum:** A contemporary choice with small, soft leaves and a "gentle texture". Varieties come in various shades, from **silvery-green to dark purple**, providing a refined look to a border.

4. Architectural Interest

- **Mahonia:** Features large, **dramatic spiny leaves** and architectural racemes of bright yellow flowers in winter that smell like lily-of-the-valley. It is a critical early-season nectar source for bees.
- **Fargesia (Clumping Bamboo):** A non-invasive bamboo that adds movement and sound as it rustles in the wind. It provides a **lush, tropical green backdrop** with elegant stems available in black, red, or gold.
- **Garrya elliptica 'James Roof':** A stunning winter feature with wavy-edged leaves and **long, silvery-silk tassels (catkins)** that hang down like ornaments from December to February.
- **Itea ilicifolia:** Similar to holly but with softer leaves, it produces **spectacular greenish-white, vanilla-scented tassels** in late summer.

5. Dense Privacy Walls

- **Portuguese Laurel (*Prunus lusitanica*):** One of the most elegant screening plants, it has **polished deep green leaves and attractive red stems**. It is very hardy and creates a sophisticated, solid wall of green.
- **English Yew (*Taxus baccata*):** The "dependable choice" for a formal look. It has fine, dark-green needles and can be clipped into a very neat, dense screen that is **highly tolerant of salt and wind**.
- **Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*):** Known for its **massive, broad, glossy leaves** that catch the light. It grows very quickly to provide a thick, "immaculate" privacy screen.

Important Planting Tip for Fences

When planting in front of a fence, always place your shrubs at least **40cm away from the base**. Fences create a "**rain shadow**"—a very dry area where the soil rarely gets natural water. Planting further out ensures your shrubs get enough moisture and have space to grow without putting pressure on the fence panels.

The UK Evergreen Shrub Guide: Year-Round Privacy and Wildlife Support for Garden Boundaries

1. Introduction: The Sustainable Boundary Strategy

This approach creates a "living wall" that provides permanent privacy, noise reduction, and a robust windbreak without the need for trellis support or invasive drilling. This guide focuses on hardy, non-climbing evergreen species specifically selected for the UK climate. These plants are chosen for their ability to support local biodiversity through nectar and nesting sites while acting as a sustainable, year-round boundary.

2. Mastering the 'Rain Shadow': Essential Boundary Planting Tips

The area at the base of a fence or wall is a challenging microclimate known as the "Rain Shadow." The structure intercepts rainfall, leaving a strip of soil that remains chronically dry, even during peak winter. Furthermore, this soil is often compacted or littered with construction rubble.

Pre-Planting Rules of Thumb

- **The 40cm Foundation Rule:** Plant shrubs at least 40cm away from the base of the structure. This is not only to escape the driest part of the rain shadow but also to protect the structural foundations of the wall and prevent roots from interfering with subterranean drains or soakaways.
- **Subsoil Remediation:** Boundary soil is notoriously poor. Excavate a hole twice the width of the root ball, remove any rubble (bricks/mortar), and incorporate a generous amount of well-rotted organic matter to improve water-holding capacity.
- **Saturation Management:** Before planting, soak the root ball in a bucket of water until bubbles stop rising. After planting, drench the area thoroughly to settle the soil around the roots.
- **The Establishment Phase:** Apply a 5–7cm layer of organic mulch (avoiding the stem) to suppress weed competition. In a boundary position, consistent watering is mandatory for the first 12–18 months.

3. Top Recommended Evergreen Shrubs

3.1 Scented Spring and Summer Stars

- **Delavay Osmanthus (*Osmanthus delavayi*):** **Hardiness H5.** Height: 1.2m. A dependable shrub with charcoal-green leaves and pure white flowers in March. Its scent is powerful enough to carry on the air even on chilly spring days.
- **Burkwood Osmanthus (*Osmanthus burkwoodii*):** **Hardiness H5.** Height/Spread: 3m x 3m. A very easy-going shrub with jasmine-like fragrance in April. It is not fussy about soil type and requires only light pruning after flowering.

- **Itea** (*Itea ilicifolia*): **Hardiness H5**. Height: 3m–4m. A rounded shrub with holly-like leaves. Its late-summer greenish-white catkins are prized for a distinct vanilla fragrance.
- **Azara** (*Azara serrata*): **Hardiness H4**. Height: 3m. This South American native features fluffy, yellow, scented summer flowers. It requires a leeward, sheltered position to protect it from icy winds.

3.2 Winter Colour and Interest

- **Viburnum** (*Viburnum tinus*): **Hardiness H4–H5**. Height/Spread: 3m x 2m. I recommend the cultivar '**Eve Price**' for its compact habit and deeper pink buds. It blooms from November through May and provides excellent winter cover for birds.
- **Mahonia** (*Mahonia x media*): **Hardiness H5**. Height: 3m. Varieties like '**Winter Sun**' or '**Charity**' provide architectural, spiny foliage and bright yellow flower racemes with a lily-of-the-valley scent in mid-winter.
- **Sweet Box** (*Sarcococca confusa*): **Hardiness H5**. Height: 1m. Essential for shady boundaries. It produces an intense honey-like fragrance in deepest winter from inconspicuous white flowers.
- **Skimmia** (*Skimmia japonica*): **Hardiness H5**. Height: 1m. Look for **subsp. reevesiana** for a combination of pink-budded flowers and bright red berries that last throughout the winter.

3.3 Striking Foliage and Quick Screening

- **Red Robin** (*Photinia x fraseri* 'Red Robin'): **Hardiness H5**. Height: 5m. Famous for its brilliant red spring growth. However, in coastal sites, ensure it is protected from salt spray which can scorch the tender new leaves.
- **Portuguese Laurel** (*Prunus lusitanica* 'Angustifolia'): **Hardiness H5**. Height: 3m–5m. A refined screening choice with deep green polished leaves on reddish stalks. It is extremely tough and tolerates both sun and shade.
- **Griselinia** (*Griselinia littoralis*): **Hardiness H4**. Height: Up to 5m. Notable for its apple-green, leathery leaves. Its upright habit is ideal for narrow boundaries where space is at a premium.
- **Emerald 'n' Gold** (*Euonymus fortunei*): **Hardiness H5**. Height: 60cm. A low-growing, variegated shrub. It is ultra-dependable and its golden edges often turn a charming pinkish-bronze in winter.

4. The Security and Wildlife Powerhouse: Spiny Shrubs

To maximize home security, I recommend a strategy of "**Layered Security**." By planting thorny species, you create "friction" for any potential intruder. Lower shrubs, such as **Gooseberry** (*Ribes uva-crispa*), are exceptionally effective when planted directly beneath ground-floor windows.

- **Firethorn** (*Pyracantha*): For guaranteed performance, choose the disease-resistant **SAPHYR ROUGE** ('Cadrou') or **SAPHYR ORANGE** ('Cadange').

- **Expert Pruning Rule:** Shorten side shoots in late summer, stopping two to three leaves from the base of the shoot to reveal and preserve the berry clusters.
- **Hawthorn** (*Crataegus monogyna*): A native powerhouse. Its sharp, dense growth is an impenetrable barrier and a preferred nesting site for roosting birds.
- **Berberis** (*Barberry*): Often called "living barbed wire." '**Darwin's Barberry**' (*B. darwinii*) is a superior evergreen choice with orange flowers and blue-black berries.
- **Gorse** (*Ulex europaeus*) & **Blackthorn** (*Prunus spinosa*): These are the "nuclear options" for boundary security. Both are fiercely spiny and perfectly suited for wilder, exposed edges or large gardens.

5. Coastal and Exposed Site Specialists

Coastal gardening is limited by salt-burn and desiccating winds. In these environments, I suggest a two-tiered approach: establish a primary windbreak to create a protected "**leeward position**" for more sensitive species.

- **Holm Oak** (*Quercus ilex*): The gold standard for coastal windbreaks. Its leathery leaves are immune to salt spray.
- **English Yew** (*Taxus baccata*): A native conifer that is surprisingly salt-tolerant. Its fine-needled foliage makes it a dependable structural element for exposed sites.
- **Escallonia**: Fast-growing with waxy leaves and summer flowers, making it a premier choice for seaside hedging.

Technical Note: Coastal specialists usually possess small, waxy, or leathery leaves. This adaptation reduces the surface area available for salt to draw water out of the plant cells, preventing "salt scorch."

6. Quick-Reference Wildlife and Security Table

Shrub Name	Pollinator Support	Bird Support	Structure/Security	Key Season
<i>Mahonia x media</i>	Winter nectar	Autumn berries	Spiny/Architectural	Winter
<i>Pyracantha</i> (Saphyr)	Spring flowers	Berries & Nesting	Dense thorns	Autumn/Winter
<i>Viburnum tinus</i>	Winter flowers	Berries & Winter cover	Dense screening	Winter/Spring
<i>Ilex aquifolium</i>	Spring nectar	Winter berries	Waxy thorns	Year-round
<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>	Spring blossom	Haws & Nesting	Dense barrier	Spring/Autumn
<i>Berberis darwinii</i>	Spring nectar	Blue-black berries	"Living barbed wire"	Spring/Winter
<i>Prunus spinosa</i>	Early blossom	Sloes & Nesting	Long, sharp thorns	Spring/Autumn

7. Maintenance and Legal Considerations

Technical Pruning and Safety

- **The Side-Shoot Rule:** For shrubs like *Ceanothus* or *Osmanthus*, trim side shoots back by one-third after flowering to maintain a dense, bushy habit.
- **Hedge Shaping:** Always prune hedges into an "**A-shape**" (wider at the base). This ensures sunlight reaches the bottom of the plant, preventing the base from becoming "leggy" and sparse.
- **Safety Protocol:** Species like *Pyracantha*, *Berberis*, and *Holly* require heavy-duty gauntlets. Note that *Ilex* and *Pyracantha* berries are toxic if ingested; site them away from areas where children or pets play.

Legal and Structural Nuance

- **High Hedges:** Under UK law, a line of two or more evergreens over 2m tall may be subject to "High Hedge" complaints if they adversely affect a neighbour's reasonable enjoyment of their property.
- **Public Highways:** Any planting adjacent to a public highway or right of way may require council consent. Growth must not obstruct pavements or sightlines for drivers.
- **Root Proximity:** Ensure large species are planted at a safe distance from drains and foundations (ideally 2m+ for larger specimens) to prevent structural subsidence or pipe damage.

RHS Hardiness Ratings Simplified

- **H4:** Hardy through most of the UK (-5°C to -10°C).
- **H5:** Hardy in most places; may suffer in severe winters (-10°C to -15°C).
- **H7:** Very hardy; survives even the most severe UK conditions (< -20°C).

8. Printable Checklist: Before You Buy

- **Soil pH and Texture:** Is the soil clay, sandy, or chalky? (Note: *Gorse* prefers acidic/sandy soil).
- **Ultimate Dimensions:** Have you checked the "Mature Height" to ensure it won't exceed legal or maintenance limits?
- **Hardiness Check:** Is the H-rating suitable for your specific region (e.g., H4 is often insufficient for the Scottish Highlands)?
- **Highway Consent:** Is the shrub within 2m of a public footpath or road?
- **Infrastructure Check:** Are there drains, soakaways, or building foundations within the expected root spread?
- **Aspect:** Does the site face North (shady/cold) or South (sunny/dry)?
- **Wildlife Goal:** Do you require nesting cover, winter nectar, or autumn fruit?
- **Security Layering:** If planting for security, have you chosen a species with enough "friction" (thorns)?