

Fence Me In: Sustainable Fencing Options

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By Lori Tobias



Trex composite fencing is made of recycled plastic and wood. The company buys 300 pounds each of landfill-bound polyethylene and hardwood sawdust annually.

Photo Courtesy Trex

In the past, fencing has been a pretty straightforward proposition: How much property do you need to contain and how inexpensively can you do it? Most manufacturers offered fencing made from wood or metal—both questionable for the environment. Some traditionally manufactured wood fencing depletes forests, and lumber sold for fencing is typically treated with toxic chemicals to ward off insects and prevent decay. Nonrecycled metal, albeit durable and low-maintenance, takes a lot of energy to create.

Today, homeowners have many more eco-friendly choices for creating a border that can offer safety, privacy and beauty.

Bamboo

Panels constructed of bamboo and a binding material, such as vinyl or steel, are touted for their durability, ease of installation, attractive appearance and sustainability. Sadly, bamboo's popularity is causing many to question just how earth-friendly it truly is. The huge demand has led to instances of overharvesting with little or no true oversight. Plus, because most bamboo comes from China, energy-intensive transportation may negate whatever green qualities the material offers. Make sure the bamboo comes from a local source and is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

Composite blends

Manufacturers have begun combining natural fiber—one company uses recycled wood, another wheat straw—with recycled plastic to create a product that has the look of wood but requires no preservatives and little to no maintenance. The pickets come in a variety of colors and styles, and most can be nailed, stapled or screwed in place. The one big question about composites is their durability over time, says Marcus Renner, a consultant with Appropriate Building Solutions, a sustainable consulting, design and construction firm in Asheville, North Carolina, and a teacher for the Western North Carolina Green Building Council. "We know how wood and chain-link fences are going to react in 20 years, but we don't know if a composite material is going to be here. After sitting in the sun for three or four decades, is it going to stay the same shape or color? That's what I am worried about."

Plants

Perhaps the greenest (and prettiest!) choice is a fence of thick plants. For privacy, a simple hedge may serve the purpose. If you need security from animals, bushes with thorns, such as blackberry or raspberry, may do the trick. "Train them to a frame they will grow within," Renner says. "It's natural, food-producing, and supports wildlife. Plus, they grow rapidly." For the best choices for your region, talk to a local plant expert, and be careful not to choose an invasive plant.

Reclaimed lumber

Reclaimed lumber can make a beautiful fence, and the quality of the old wood will likely be better than the quickly grown virgin woods available on the market today. Availability of different types of salvaged wood varies by region. On the West Coast, Douglas fir and redwood are abundant. On the East Coast, pine is more prevalent.

Different woods require different treatments—or none at all, depending on who you ask. Left untreated, the fence may fade, splinter, warp and rot. David Johnston, president of green building consultancy What's Working in Boulder, Colorado, favors a penetrating stain, particularly for soft woods such as Douglas fir or pine.

"You don't want a low-VOC, water-based finish because water-based finishes tend not to penetrate wood, so they will wear off and need retreatment," Johnston says. "Treat the wood with a solvent if you want it to be durable for 10 to 20 years. Outside, solvents are not as big a concern. They outgas relatively quickly."

Another school of thought eschews chemical treatment. "Many people don't protect fences," Renner says. To keep the wood fresh, he recommends using

linseed or tung oil. "They can be sprayed on with a garden hose. Keep it in your garden shed, and every two to three years, as the fence dries out, just walk along and spray."

Recycled plastic

It's strong, durable and maintenance-free, and it keeps a lot of plastic out of the landfill. But buyer beware, Johnston says. "Some of it is recycled, some of it is not. It's very hard to find out if it is recycled or virgin."

Because few companies manufacture recycled plastic fencing, it can be pricey. Also, some don't like its appearance. Plastic fades, and it could shrink or swell if not installed properly. "I would use screws over nails and go with the manufacturers' recommendations," Renner says.

- **DON'T** assume recycled plastic fencing is a fail-safe green choice. Some brands contain a mix of virgin and recycled plastic, and it's tough to figure out whether a product truly contains 100 percent recycled plastic.

- **DO** consider a less-complicated fencing option: plants. Simple hedges may be all you need if you're looking for privacy; to keep animals out, try trained blackberry or raspberry bushes.

Resources

[Cali Bamboo](#)

(888) 788-2254
bamboo fencing

[Fiberon](#)

(800) 573-8841
recycled composite fencing

[Heartland BioComposites](#)

(866) 997-7637
recycled composite fencing

[Trex](#)

(800) 289-8739
recycled composite fencing