

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

In these days of burgeoning populations, tract housing and suburban sprawl, farms are favorite targets for real estate developers. They see the potential cleared fields and rolling hillsides offer the visionary with money enough to buy large acreage at relatively low prices, and sense enough to sell small lots, after subdividing, for relatively high prices.

Purchasers of tract houses constructed on open farmland proceed to provide themselves with privacy screens, firmly believing that whatever is planted, fertilized and watered will grow.

In an amazing number of instances, the homeowner is not disappointed. His foundation plantings of ilex, rhododendron, and yew somehow survive. They survive in spite of semi-annual doses of lime, weedkiller, fertilizer and top-dressing applied to the surrounding lawns.

Growth of these acid-loving plants is usually retarded but seldom do they die; they are only stunted. Just as well, too, for given ideal growing conditions, these evergreens would soon overwhelm the houses they are intended to compliment.

Most of Massachusetts enjoys, but fails to utilize to best advantage, excellent conditions for producing fine specimens of broad-leaved evergreens. What do they require that they're not getting? Massive quantities of benign neglect.

From Provincetown to Pittsfield our soils tend to be acidic. In the east pines and oaks flourish and birches and maples thrive, even though they prefer the sweeter soils of the western parts of the state. Anywhere pines and oaks grow, broad-leaved evergreens will do well if left alone most of the time.

Growing healthy evergreens is no trick if homeowners forego the expense and labor of doing things to them and their environment.

Purchase small healthy potted plants or ones balled and burlapped. Dig a hole in the ground twice the size of the pot; remove plant from pot (or if balled and burlapped, loosen burlap but leave in place); make sure the roots of the plant aren't compacted; dump a few trowelsful of peatmoss in the hole and stir; center the plant in the hole at the same depth it is growing in the pot; fill the hole with soil, tamping firmly and banking the edges to form a saucer to catch rain water.

Be sure the plant gets a thorough watering once a week the first year and plentiful waterings as winter approaches.

Now leave them alone. Don't cultivate for the roots are shallow. Don't clean out the oak leaves and pine needles that catch in low-spreading branches; as they rot, these will feed the plants exactly what they need in precisely the right quantities and at the right time.

Ignore them. Don't feed, weed, or mess around. Enjoy.

They may not blossom the first spring or, if the plants were a couple of years old when you bought them, they may.

After rhododendrons have bloomed, they can use a bit of help. Most are hybrid; they produce sterile seed. A lot of a hybrid plant's energy goes into production of seeds that can never germinate.

To assure the plant will use its energy for growth, remove faded blossoms. Care must be taken in doing this because new growth is produced at the base of each flower cluster. A little practice will teach the gardener just the right bend and twist motion to remove the complete flowering part without disturbing the new growth.

Broad-leaved evergreens given this life-style should never be used as foundation plants. Put them along the lot lines at the side and rear of the property and either give them plenty of space or plan to thin them later.

And give them freedom from encroaching lawns, if you must have such a time- and money-consuming luxury. What lawns require to keep them beautiful is what makes miniatures of acid-loving plants at the foundation.

Lawns flourish in sweet soil; evergreens starve there. Lawns thrive in bright sunshine; evergreens prefer semi-shade or filtered sunlight. Lawns compete with evergreens for water and rain reaches shorter grass roots before seeping down to deeper roots of larger plants.

Let Nature do the mulching. If you must help Nature, mix equal parts of peatmoss and sand. Spread this mixture under evergreens to provide cool moist and permeable protection from burning sun. The plant's luxurious leaf-growth will soon provide adequate shade and hide any debris gathering beneath the low-spreading branches.

Pruning? Of course evergreens can be pruned. Deadwood should be removed with clean sharp pruning snippers. Cut back to the base of the branch, level with the stem to which it's attached. Don't break off deadwood and leave a rough open stub to invite disease.

Disease? Yes, in weak evergreen plants, sometimes. Strong healthy broadleaved evergreens seem to cure their own diseases.

Property-owners in subdivisions can enjoy outdoor privacy afforded by evergreen hedges. Unlike fences, these lush plants never need paint or repair and, properly neglected, will enhance the entire neighborhood as well as the property values of the contented homeowner.