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# VACATION HOMESITES

*selection and development*



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE      MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

# VACATION HOMESITES

## *selection and development*

by Willard Bosserman  
County Extension Director  
Crawford and Roscommon Counties

EACH YEAR MORE FAMILIES are buying second homes in rural northern Michigan. Often this second home is along a stream or on the shore of a lake.

As waterfront property becomes more scarce, many of the second homes are being built in wooded areas rather than on water.

Whether or not the property is adjacent to water, most owners do want to beautify it. Some leave the property entirely natural. On the other extreme, others take out almost all of the native vegetation and replace it with nursery-grown plants to create a more formal appearance.

This publication presents some ideas for vacation home owners to help them make their second home grounds more enjoyable. There are many reasons why landscaping is a sound additional investment in your vacation home. Some of these are:

- To harmonize the structure with its natural setting.
- To protect steep areas from eroding.
- To attract wildlife.
- To make the surroundings more enjoyable.
- To save money and cut down on maintenance work while benefiting the natural landscape.

### Consider Landscape Before Buying a Lot

Many building and landscape problems can be avoided if you know what you want and keep your objectives in mind. Try to picture the house on the lot as you shop for a location. Important considerations are:

**Slope** — The slope of the land is important. It can determine the type of home you build. A steep slope can cause drainage and erosion problems.

**Natural drainage** — Look at the prospective lot to see which way the surface water drains in relation to the possible location of the house. Keep in mind that the drainage should be away from the house. Some homes built in natural drainage ways face serious flooding and moisture problems during the wet time of the year.

**Be considerate of your next-door neighbors** — They can hold you liable for damage caused by water that you divert onto their property. Before you buy a lot,

make sure that the surface water can be drained into the street or alley and not on your neighbor.

Avoid a lot that is lower in elevation than the surrounding area. It could mean receiving surface water from other property, flooded basements, and non-working septic tanks.

**View** — Look for a lot which has a pleasant view. Avoid a building site which overlooks undesirable scenes.

**Soil type** — Soil type is important when considering a disposal field for the septic system. Best type is a sandy or gravelly soil with finished grade at least four feet above the high ground water table, as required by state regulations. Avoid clay soil where individual septic systems are being used. You can get soil type information from your County Cooperative Extension Service, the Soil Conservation Service and County Health Department.

### Plan Landscaping Before Building

**Location of house** — Many northern Michigan townships and counties have zoning ordinances. Look into this matter. Ask the zoning ordinance administrator where to locate the house in relation to the street, side and rear lot lines. County zoning offices usually are located in county buildings or courthouses.

**Location of septic tank and well** — The Michigan Health Department requires that the septic tank and drainage field be at least 50 feet from the well. Make sure you have the same isolation from the neighbor's septic tank and well on either side and to the rear of you. See your County Health Department for information about septic tank size and location.

**Trees to be saved** — It takes a long time to grow a good tree. Trees with a potential for shade and beauty should be clearly marked so that the construction crew will not remove them. Valuable trees are often damaged by equipment during construction. Protect them by attaching slats of wood around the tree trunk with wire or rope. Do not drive nails into a tree. Also tree roots need protection by building a wooden guard fence 8 to 10 feet out from the tree trunk.\* Too many trees near the house can make a dwelling gloomy, so save only the most desirable trees.

### What Kind of Environment?

What you do to landscape your vacation lot will depend upon what kind of environment you seek. There are two basic kinds — natural and formal.

**Natural setting** — Some people prefer to leave their vacation lot as untouched as possible. It is only necessary to clear a space for the disposal field. Some nursery plantings or natural transplants may be desirable around the foundation where all vegetation was removed during construction. A few foundation plants may be desired to break the monotony of straight building lines, thus harmonizing the building with the natural setting.

\*See Extension folder F-238  
"Protecting Shade Trees and Shrubs."



Sloping land need not pose problems and it offers opportunity to design a pleasing blend of land and building as shown above. When finished, this slope will be well sodded to prevent erosion.

The home at left preserves an entirely native setting. A few foundation plants may help harmonize the building and environment. In this setting, owners should guard against too dense vegetation.

For those who prefer a suburban look, birch trees left in natural groupings form a pleasing foil for sleek contemporary buildings.

These trees were not in the way—the owner made them a focal center of a circular drive and added ground cover for a finishing touch.



The owner of this A-frame dwelling planned ahead—he left a jack pine to soften the lines of the blank roof for an effect more striking than either tree or roof by themselves.

THE COVER PICTURE of a truly rustic dwelling in an untouched natural setting contrasts with some of the more formal development of land and structure shown on these pages. A key to satisfaction in vacation homesites is seeing all the problems and possibilities before buying.



The side and rear of this wooded lot were left completely natural, and some trees were left in the lawn for shade and beauty. Both evergreen and deciduous shrubs are used as foundation plantings and serve to harmonize natural and formal.



Designing a deck around a tree near the house enhances both the utility and beauty of an outdoor living area.

Little maintenance is needed with a natural setting. Little or no lawn eliminates grass cutting.

**Formal grounds** — There are vacation home owners who prefer a more formal setting to the natural one. The publications listed at the end of this bulletin offer suggestions for formal settings.

### Situations Requiring Planting

Even on the lot which is left entirely natural, you may want to add a few plants. Foundation plantings, screenings, and wildlife attraction provide opportunities for supplemental plantings.

#### FOUNDATION

Low-growing shrubs are used near the foundation for a number of reasons. Their principle functions are:

- To soften architectural lines
- To screen foundation walls
- To blend building with setting.

**Distance from building** — A common mistake in landscaping is to set foundation plantings too near the building. Keep plants in front of the drip line of the eaves. Place plants far enough from the building so that when they are mature there will be space between them and the house. The distance should be one to one and one-half times the average mature spread of the plant involved.

**Types of material** — Foundation plantings generally consist of low-growing shrubs. They can be either evergreen or deciduous. Taller-growing plants can be used to fill in or break the flat expanse of a large blank wall. The roof of an A-frame house presents an expansive area which needs a large plant to break its monotony. (See list of plant types on page 5.)

#### SCREENING

Functions of screening are to separate use-areas and provide the family some privacy. Screening can be accomplished with a few planned plantings.

#### WILDLIFE

Attracting wildlife may not be the primary purpose for landscape development but it is an added enjoyment. Many of the plants used for landscape purposes offer food and shelter for wildlife. Most of the plants listed on page 5 produce fruit which wildlife can eat.

Where an area is to remain natural, you can add some plants to increase the wildlife drawing power of your lot. Some plants to consider for this purpose are:

Autumn olive	Bittersweet
Honey suckle	Wintergreen
Crab apple	Dogwood
High bush cranberry	Wild grape
Blueberry	Fragrant sumac
Elderberry	Nannyberry
Maple-leaved viburnum	Wildrose

### Controlling Erosion

If you have done a good job of selecting a site without much slope, you will have little trouble with ero-

sion control. But, if by preference, or for whatever reason, you have selected a site on a river bank or lake shore, you may have a steep bank with an erosion problem. An architect can best design your cottage to take advantage of the natural slope in a way to beautify your property as well as to prevent erosion.

Where architectural design is not incorporated into the slope, there are some things you can do to protect your property from eroding. One method is to divert surface water to a hard surface drain or to an underground drain tile which carries the water to an area not subject to erosion. Your county extension agent can give you valuable suggestions in controlling erosion.

### Avoid Problems

Many problems can be avoided if you pay early attention to them and observe the following precautions:

**Mark location of the well** — Why? So it can be easily found for repairs. An unmarked well pipe may be damaged by bulldozing. It can be marked with a steel stake, concrete marker, or wooden stake.

**Keep septic tanks clean** — The septic tank should be cleaned every two to five years depending on how much you use it. Summer use only would require cleaning less often than continual use. Be safe! Clean it often. Cleaning at the right time will avoid the risk of injuring or destroying the tile field. Septic tank cleaning is a job for a professional, licensed operator.

**Plan the driveway for snow removal** — Clear drives to a width of no less than 15 feet. Driveway culverts ought to have a minimum of 15 inches diameter and 20 feet in length.

**Plan for safety** — Protect your property with spark-proof tops on all fireplaces, incinerators, and barbecue chimneys.

### Establish Ground Cover

In various locations on your property, you can supplement natural ground cover and enhance its beauty by adding a variety of nursery-grown plants. The location will suggest the best kind of planting to add.

#### SUNNY AREA:

**Grass** — Kentucky blue grass.

**Shrubby** — Andorra creeping juniper, Japanese barberry, grape honeysuckle, sweet fern, dwarf bush blueberry, buffaloberry.

#### SHADY AREA:

**Grass** — Creeping red fescue.

**Ground cover** — Japanese spurge, periwinkle (myrtle), Baltic ivy.

**Shrubby** — Dwarf Japanese yew, Canada or American yew.

#### WATER'S EDGE:

**Grass** — Reed's canary grass.

**Shrubby** — Willow, dogwood.

# Plant Types for Landscape Use in Michigan

## FOREGROUND TYPES

### 1. Low Ground Covers

H—8' to 1'; D—8' to 1'

- \*Japanese spurge
- \*Periwinkle (myrtle)
- \*Baltic ivy

### 2. Low Shrubs

H—3' to 4'; D—3' to 4'

- Dwarf Japanese floweringquince
- Red spirea
- Box Japanese barberry

### 3. Medium Shrubs

H—4' to 7'; D—4' to 6'

- \*Dwarf winged euonymus
- \*Dwarf ninebark
- Black jetbead

### 4. Low Spreader Evergreens

H—1' to 4'; D—4' to 6'

- Andorra creeping juniper
- Creeping juniper
- \*Canada or American yew

### 5. Medium Spreader Evergreens

H—1' to 4'; D—4' to 6'

- \*Dwarf Japanese yew
- Compact pfitzer juniper
- \*Oregon hollygrape

### 6. Broadening or Shrub-Like Trees

H—under 25'; D—15'

- French hybrid lilac
- \*Juneberry (amelanchier)
- Flowering crabapple

### 7. Vines

H—variable; D—variable

- \*Baby wintercreeper euonymus
- \*Halls Japanese honeysuckle
- American bittersweet

### 11. Small Trees

H—25' to 40'; D—40'

- \*Japanese maple
- Mountain ash
- Paul's scarlet hawthorne

### 12. Tall Accent Evergreens

H—20' to 70'; D—25'

- \*Canadian hemlock
- Colorado blue spruce
- Pyramid Chinese juniper

### 13. Shade Trees

H—40' to 70'; D—35'

- Red or sugar maple
- Red oak
- Moraine locust

## BACKGROUND TYPES

### 8. High-Wide Spreader Evergreens

H—6' to 10'; D—6' to 8'

- \*Japanese spreading yew
- Pfizer's juniper
- Common juniper

### 9. Conical Evergreens

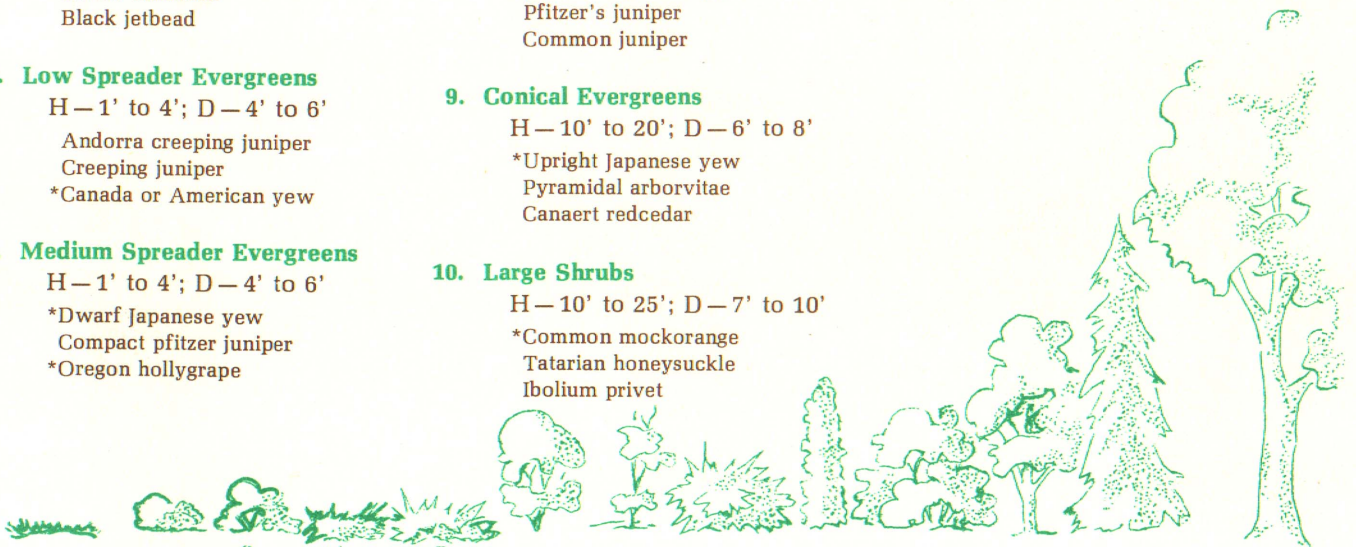
H—10' to 20'; D—6' to 8'

- \*Upright Japanese yew
- Pyramidal arborvitae
- Canaert redcedar

### 10. Large Shrubs

H—10' to 25'; D—7' to 10'

- \*Common mockorange
- Tatarian honeysuckle
- Ibodium privet



Types 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13

\*Shade Tolerant

H—Height (Average)  
D—Diameter (of spread or spacing)

Prepared by Joseph T. Cox, Extension Specialist in Landscape Architecture, M.S.U.

Other landscape bulletins available from your County Cooperative Extension Service office:

Order by number.

Controlling Pests of Trees and Shrubs E-534

Familiar Trees of Michigan E-616

Lawn Weed Control E-653

Ornamental Deciduous Trees for Michigan E-552 (15c)

Ornamental Evergreens E-426 (20c)

Ornamental Shrubs for Michigan Homes E-493 (15c)

Ornamental Vines for Michigan Homes E-492 (15c)

Outdoor Lighting for Home Grounds E-494 (15c)

Paving for Home Grounds CE-6 (15c)

Planning for Residential Properties E-549 (15c)

Planning for Rural Homes E-491 (15c)

Planting Trees and Shrubs E-592

Protecting Trees and Shrubs from Construction Damage F-238

Home Sewage Disposal E-577

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