



PLANT NEBRASKA

# Side Yard Landscaping

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How often do we think about our side yards? Those open spaces between the lot line and our homes, garages or other outbuildings are often very narrow. And the narrower the space, the less likely we are to think about them or use them.

They are, of course, essential—a way to get from front to back without trespassing on neighbors' lots. If they're narrow, they're often relegated to some form of walkway with turfgrass or hardscaping.

For as small as they are and as little as we “use” them, what we require of our side yards is significant:

- They need to be somewhat navigable to move from front to back within the property lines.
- Since they butt up to buildings, they need to slope away from foundations to prevent water damage.
- We don't want them to be an eyesore, either to our neighbors or to ourselves.
- If they're close to homes or other buildings next door, privacy or some kind of visual barrier is often desirable.



Homeowners, and gardeners in particular, like to use every inch of land they have. The wider a side yard is, the more likely to be used like any other yard space. But there's no reason to waste even a narrow patch of yard. It might be just 3 feet wide, but if it's 50 feet long, that's 150 square feet. So what can we do with these “outdoor hallways”? Below are some ideas, but do check city codes; and it's helpful to let neighbors know what you're doing in advance if it will affect their property or views.

## What Do You Need? What Do You Want?

For homeowners with dogs, a dog run might be the highest priority. Stepping stones or turf are the most likely choices for surfaces, as very few groundcovers can

handle the abuse. For families with children, some kind of usable play space could take pressure off the more visible front and backyard. Is there room for an outdoor play kitchen, hopscotch or sandbox? Is it cool or warm enough for use in the times and seasons they're most likely to want to be outdoors?

If storage space is at a premium, is there room to store things that don't require temperature control, like tools, ladders and lawn or sports equipment? You might be able to slide a small shed into the space to neatly contain some of these items.



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Is it wide enough for a small patio area with tables and chairs? Keep in mind that sunlight or shade can be intense in narrow spaces like this and can vary dramatically by season.

## Plants and Possibly a Potting Bench?

What do you want in your sideyard? “I know,” says the gardener, “plants.” Not bare soil or physical stuff but plants—for beauty, interest, culinary purposes and pollinators. Possibly a space for a potting bench, maybe even a foldup one that can be raised and lowered as needed. But more likely plants.

The amount of sunlight and moisture will dictate plant choices, but groundcovers can cover bare soil and eliminate the need for mowing. Sedges can only handle minimal foot traffic, but they tend to be shorter and require almost no care. Taller plants are preferably upright to keep paths clear of dropping stems and easily navigable.



One tricky thing about these tight spaces is that they may have a full day of shade and then an hour or more of full, hot late day sun, or vice versa. It may take some experimenting to find the shade or sun plants best adapted to the conditions. Side yards that are deeply shaded tend to stay wet longer and are more prone to drainage issues, so you might need to consider adding amendments like gravel or mulch to offset that as well.

Most vegetable and herbs depend on sunlight and moisture, but salad greens like kale, lettuce or arugula and root crops like radishes and carrots can handle limited sun, which is actually a benefit for greens and extends the season.

Vines on a trellis, chain link or other style fence can convert undesirable views to green ones. But keep your neighbor in mind; aggressive plants will impact their yard possibly more than your own. With these spaces that may be more visible to them than to you, a slight twist of Wendell Berry’s “Do unto those downstream [beside you] as you would have them do unto you” is a good guideline for making neighborly choices.

Finally, consider adding some containers plants, which lends themselves to flexibility in the space. Using potted plants rather than placing them in the ground makes it easier to change them out if something isn’t working.

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