

Low-spreading, quickly growing species are useful on slopes where soil erosion could become a concern. Step-up planters with spreading evergreens can change a problem slope into an easy-care area. These slopes next to steps can be hard to keep covered with vegetation. They end up as play areas--bicycle runs in summer and sled runs in winter--but they're also eyesores. Solve the problem by using a retaining wall and fill the area with evergreens, such as yews. Low varieties will not grow tall enough to block light from basement windows, and upright varieties reduce the height of the foundation wall.

Shrubs also can soften the stark, often blank and rigid look of walls. To make a high wall appear lower, group shrubs of similar height along the wall's base. Or use the canvas-like blankness of a fence to create an artistic, espaliered design, such as the fire thorn, or pyracantha. Fire thorn berries are fiery orange or red; the branches, thorny and evergreen. Its spring blossoms are a lacy white. Buy fire thorn plants from a local nursery to ensure their hardiness in your area.