Hiding an Air-Conditioning Unit

**The problem:** An ugly feature that you can’t move and need to be able to get to.

**Factors to consider**

*How often do you need to get to the feature you want to block?* Although an air-conditioning unit is unsightly (and sometimes noisy), you’ll probably only need to get to it once or twice a year, for service or repair. We’ll be concentrating on features that don’t require frequent access this month; we’ll tackle features that require daily, or at least weekly, access (like trash cans) in a future issue.

*How big is the area around the feature?* Some of the solutions we offer will work better in big yards, and others will work just fine in a small garden. Go out and measure the size of the feature and the amount of space you’ll need around it. Be realistic! There are several space considerations with your air-conditioning unit. First, the A/C unit will put out a fair amount of heat, so make sure that any plants will be far enough away that they won’t suffer heat stress. Second, measure how much room you’ll need around the unit to make sure it gets sufficient airflow. For instance, a solid barrier like a fence should probably be a little further away from the unit than one that the air can move easily through and around, like potted plants. As a related issue, consider how much room you’ll need to be able to move around the unit on those occasions, however infrequent, when you do need to work on it. An 18” path may seem like enough room, until you’ve got a 250-pound repairman maneuvering himself and his tools through there. Also consider what kind of “flooring” you’ll want underfoot within the enclosure; gravel and prefabricated pavers are two good solutions. Finally, while you’re evaluating the space, note any other existing features you’ll either want to hide (like a gas meter) or leave accessible (like a faucet).

*Can you see the feature from inside the house, or do you only see it from another point in the garden?* If the feature is visible when you look out a window — especially your kitchen or family room window — you’ll probably want to work on a solution that blocks it year-round; if it’s only visible when you’re sitting on your deck in July, a more seasonal solution may strike your fancy.

*Is your garden pretty or practical — or both?* If you build a trellis, you can use it to support either cucumbers or nasturtiums; if you plant shrubs, you can grow hibiscus or blueberries.

*How much sun is available in that section of the garden?* You obviously have the most options for “green” solutions in a sunny area; you’ll have fewer options in partial shade; and in deep shade, you’ll be limited to either a fence or perhaps some evergreen shrubs.

**Keep these factors in mind** as you look at our five solutions. We’ve listed some of the pros and cons of each solution to help you evaluate which one will work best for you, and also indicated approximate prices, so you don’t break your budget.

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**Cost Key**

$ = less than $25

$$ = $25-$50

$$ = more than $50
Install a fence: Large do-it-yourself centers sell sections of prefabricated fence, usually in 8' sections of fencing 5' or 6' tall. If that is a size that works with your space, this will be the quickest and easiest solution. Sections run around $50 for white vinyl or unfinished wood, which come in a variety of styles. For around $25, you can get a simple wooden stockade fence. Either kind will require digging holes and installing posts. If a prefab section is too big for you, you’ll probably want a custom installation, which you may or may not want to tackle yourself, depending on your handyperson skills.

Cost: $$ (prefab) or $$$ (custom)

Pros

- Quick results
- Year-round coverage
- Low maintenance
- Can combine with other ideas (e.g., plant flowers in front of it)
- Can choose a fence that will enhance the style of your garden
- Works in sun, partial shade, and shade

Cons

- Requires that you have some construction skills, or are willing to hire someone who does
- Either you’re limited to given sizes of prefab sections, or you’ll pay significantly more for a custom installation
- Boring

Display potted plants: Many of us like to give our houseplants a summer vacation outside; instead of letting them take up room on the porch, you might consider arranging them in front of the feature you want to hide. If the space is big enough, you can also add pots of annuals for color and excitement.

Tip: Houseplants, in general, shouldn’t be left in full sun; if that’s what you’ve got, use sun-loving annuals in containers here and keep your houseplants elsewhere.

Cost: $ (if you use mostly plants and pots you already own)

Pros

- Quick results
- Easy to arrange and rearrange
- Can adapt to the amount of space you have
- Works in sun, partial shade, and shade
- Works well if the area is paved

Cons

- Not a year-round solution
- May not block the feature completely
- Will need to water the containers regularly
Plant tall annuals: If you have a bed that’s at least a foot wide — and preferably wider — you can plant tall, colorful annuals in it. In addition to the obvious choices, like sunflowers, there are plenty of other annuals with some cultivars that will grow to 18” or more. (See the list at the bottom of the next page for some suggestions, but make sure you check heights for the specific cultivars you’re considering.)

Cost: $

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Can change every year</td>
<td>• Not as many choices for semi-shade or shade</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Colorful and eye-catching</td>
<td>• Need a bed that’s wide enough</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can choose plants according to your garden style</td>
<td>• Doesn’t provide year-round coverage</td>
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Provide a trellis to support vines: Most garden centers offer a wide assortment of decorative metal and wood trellises in many sizes; you can also build your own with wood framing and wire or string supports. The key to success here is to make sure that the trellis is sturdy enough to support the plant, and that it is well anchored. One easy way to provide a strong, stable trellis is to create an A-shaped structure by leaning two trellises into each other and fastening them at the top. (See the list at the bottom of the next page for some vine suggestions.)

Tip: You can grow a crop of peas in the spring, follow them with cucumbers for the summer, and then do a second crop of peas in the fall, all on the same trellis.

Tip: Hummingbirds love trumpet vines!

Cost: $$$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Can build to any size or configuration</td>
<td>• Perennial vines, especially the woody ones like trumpet vine and wisteria, require regular pruning to keep them under control</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Many attractive prefab trellises are available</td>
<td>• Can be overwhelming in a small space</td>
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<td>• Fast seasonal coverage</td>
<td>• Works best in a sunny spot</td>
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<td>• Versatile; can change flowers from year to year</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Many flowers and many vegetables available</td>
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Resources: Henry Field’s® sells nylon trellising in 15-foot lengths to use with your wooden frameworks; they also sell a 32”-tall, foldable pea fence that will provide support for most climbing vegetables. Call 513-354-1494 for a free catalog.
Plant shrubs: This is a classic solution to the problem — but it’s classic because it works. Think through the look you want; don’t plant cascading shrubs like forsythia or buddleia if you want a clipped, formal effect. Make sure you space plants according to their mature size; remember that you’ll need to leave room behind the shrubs for periodic access to the feature you’re trying to hide. (See the list at the bottom of this page for some shrub suggestions.)

Tip: Consider fruit bushes, like blueberries. These come in both dwarf forms (about 2’ tall) and full-sized shrubs (generally 4’-6’); remember that you need to plant two different kinds for optimum productivity.

Cost: $$ to $$$ (depending on the size and number of plants; you’ll pay more for larger plants, but will get results faster)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evergreen shrubs provide year-round coverage</td>
<td>Can take several seasons to reach full size</td>
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<tr>
<td>Full-grown shrubs can completely block the view of the feature</td>
<td>Bushes require regular pruning to keep them under control once they’ve reached the size you want</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can find a shrub for sunny, partially shady, or shady situations</td>
<td>Flowering bushes are generally deciduous</td>
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<tr>
<td>The best long-term “green” solution</td>
<td>Not good in small spaces; generally requires a fair amount of room for the best effect</td>
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annuals
- Amaranthus
- Centaurea
- Cosmos
- Flowering tobacco (Nicotiana)
- Larkspur (Consolida)
- Mexican sunflower (Tithonia)
- Pincushion flower (Scabiosa)
- Salvia
- Snapdragon (Antirrhinum)
- Spider flower (Cleome)
- Sunflower (Helianthus)
- Zinnia

Compact flowering shrubs:
- Azalea
- Deutzia
- Rose

Large or spreading flowering shrubs:
- Butterfly bush (Buddleia)
- Forsythia
- Hydrangea
- Lilac
- Mock orange (Philadelphus)
- Rhododendron
- Rose of Sharon (Hibiscus syriacus)
- Summersweet (Clethra)

Perennial flowers (cont.):
- Trumpet vine
- Wisteria

Annual crops:
- Beans
- Cucumbers
- Melons
- Peas
- Squash

Perennial crop:
- Grapes

vines
Annual flowers:
- Morning glories
- Nasturtiums
- Sweet peas

Perennial flowers:
- Clematis
- Climbing rose
- Honeysuckle

Tip:
Consider fruit bushes, like blueberries. These come in both dwarf forms (about 2’ tall) and full-sized shrubs (generally 4’-6’); remember that you need to plant two different kinds for optimum productivity.

Write to us!
If you have any additional solutions to this problem, or have a problem of your own that you’d like to see featured in this section, e-mail us at: Questions@GardenSolutions.com or write to us at: “One Problem, Five Solutions,” Garden Solutions Editorial Offices, 7036 North Easton Road, Suite A, Pipersville, PA 18947