

FROM THE GROW YOUR OWN RESILIENCE SERIES

DESIGNED FOR THE LANDSCAPES OF
AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

LIVING SHELTER PLANNING ESSENTIALS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO USING TREES AS LIVING INFRASTRUCTURE



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CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Part 1. Why Shelter Matters Now	5
Part 2. Windbreak vs Shelterbelt	6
Part 3. What a Good Shelterbelt Actually Does	7
Part 5. Shelterbelt Goals	9
Part 4. The #1 Design Principle: Filter, Don't Wallt	9
Part 6. Placement: Where to Put it?	11
Part 7. Spacing & Rows: The Rule of Thumb	13
Part 8. Height & Length: Make it Work Properly	15

INTRODUCTION

Stop Accepting Wind as “Normal”

Across much of New Zealand, wind is treated as an unavoidable background condition.

From coastal blocks to exposed inland ridgelines, it is often accepted as “how it is here.”

Unmanaged wind strips moisture from soil.

Slows plant growth.

Stresses livestock.

Increases irrigation demand.

Shortens the lifespan of trees and infrastructure.

And over time, it quietly reduces the productivity and resilience of land.

Many rural properties are planned around access, fencing, and buildings.

Yet shelter is left as an afterthought.

This guide argues the opposite:

Shelter is living infrastructure.

When we reduce wind pressure, nearly every other system improves.

Soil holds moisture longer.

Plants establish faster.

Animals experience less stress.

Outdoor spaces become usable.

Maintenance decreases.

If you are struggling with dry soil, stunted growth, exposed paddocks, or uncomfortable living conditions, wind is likely part of the cause, even if it is not the most obvious one.

This guide focuses on the fundamentals:

- The difference between a windbreak and a shelterbelt
- How shelter actually works
- Why solid barriers aren't ideal
- Where to place shelter for maximum effect
- How height and length determine performance

Established early and designed well, shelter becomes one of our highest-leverage decisions for long term land health.

So, let's start with the basics.

Part 1.

WHY SHELTER MATTERS NOW

Before we grab the keys and head off to Bunnings, let's take a few moments to understand what wind is actually doing to your land right now.

Shelter is not theoretical. It addresses real and measurable pressures.

If you're in an area which experiences high winds (likely you are, and that's why we're here), even where you're not seeing visible damage, constant airflow increases moisture loss from soil and plant surfaces. This increases watering demand, slows establishment, and reduces overall plant performance.

In exposed conditions, leaf damage and structural stress become common, especially for young trees and productive crops.

Livestock are also affected. Cold winds increase energy demand during winter, while hot drying winds contribute to dehydration and pasture stress in summer. Infrastructure such as fences, buildings, and water systems experiences greater wear under persistent exposure.

These pressures accumulate gradually. The result is not always dramatic failure, but reduced resilience and higher maintenance across the property.

Well-designed shelter changes this baseline.

By slowing wind rather than stopping it, shelterbelts create a more stable microclimate that extends well beyond the planting itself.

Within this moderated zone:

- Soil retains moisture for longer
- Plant establishment improves
- Wind-related stress decreases
- Working conditions become more consistent

Shelter also contributes to long-term land health.

Trees and shrubs add organic matter, stimulate biological activity through root systems, and create habitat that strengthens ecological stability.

In multi-row systems, shelter can also provide productive outputs such as poles, fodder, firewood, or mulch material.

When wind pressure is reduced early in a property's development, gardens, orchards, pasture, and infrastructure require less correction over time.

Shelter does not simply protect what you already have.

It improves the conditions in which everything else grows.

Part 2.

WINDBREAK VS SHELTERBELT

Understanding Scale

The terms windbreak and shelterbelt are often used interchangeably, but they describe systems operating at different scales and serving different purposes.

Understanding the distinction helps you choose the right approach for your property.

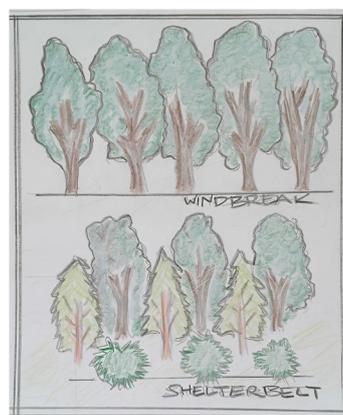


Fig. 1. Comparison of windbreak (single row), vs shelterbelt (multi row)

Windbreak

A windbreak is typically a **single row** or narrow strip of trees or shrubs designed to protect a specific area.

A windbreak is often used to:

- Shield a vegetable garden or orchard
- Protect a house or cabin from prevailing winds
- Reduce exposure in a small paddock or animal shelter
- Provide targeted protection in highly exposed spots

Windbreaks are usually faster and cheaper to establish. They work well where space is limited or protection is needed in a focused location.

Shelterbelt

A shelterbelt is a longer, often multi-row planting designed to protect larger areas.

It is commonly used to:

- Reduce wind across paddocks or fields
- Protect infrastructure such as buildings, roads, and water systems
- Improve pasture performance and livestock comfort
- Establish long-term ecological corridors

Because shelterbelts include multiple rows, they provide stronger and more stable protection over time. They also allow layered planting that combines pioneer species with longer-lived canopy and understory trees.

Which Do You Need?

Most lifestyle properties benefit from both:

- Windbreaks for targeted, immediate protection
- Shelterbelts for broader, long-term resilience

Start with the most exposed and most valuable areas. Expand outward as conditions improve.

Part 3.

WHAT A GOOD SHELTERBELT ACTUALLY DOES

A well-designed shelterbelt does not stop wind completely. It moderates it, creating a calmer and more stable environment across the area it protects.

When wind hits a solid barrier such as a wall or dense fence, it is forced upward and then drops sharply on the other side. This creates turbulence and can increase damage immediately downwind.

A living shelterbelt behaves differently. Because branches and foliage allow some air to pass through, wind energy is absorbed and dispersed gradually rather than redirected abruptly.

Creates a Stable Sheltered Zone

The protective effect extends well beyond the trees themselves. Depending on height and density, the sheltered zone can reach many tree-heights downwind.

Within this area:

- Plants experience less physical damage
- Soil remains more stable and less prone to erosion
- Moisture loss slows
- Establishment rates improve
- Outdoor areas become more usable

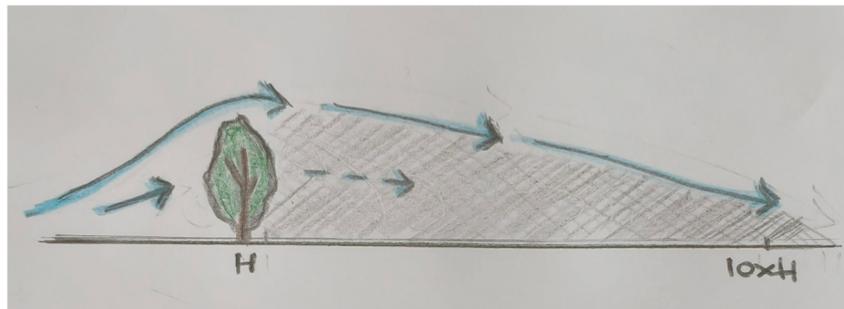


Fig 2. Sheltered Zone = 5 - 10x height (H)

Wind increases evapotranspiration, the combined loss of water from soil and plant leaves. By moderating airflow, shelter helps retain soil moisture for longer periods, particularly during dry conditions.

Livestock benefit from reduced cold exposure in winter and less drying stress in summer. As shelter matures and gains height, the protected zone expands, strengthening overall system performance.

The result is greater consistency. Conditions become less extreme, allowing plants, animals, and infrastructure to function more reliably over time.

Once you understand what shelter does, the next step is deciding what you want it to achieve on your property.

Part 4.

SHELTERBELT GOALS

Choose Your Purpose

Before moving into technical design principles, clarify what you want your shelter system to achieve.

Different goals influence placement, structure, and species selection.

Common objectives include:

- Protecting homes and outdoor living areas
- Improving orchard and garden performance
- Reducing livestock stress
- Limiting salt spray in coastal areas
- Improving pasture growth
- Creating privacy or reducing noise
- Producing firewood, poles, fodder, mulch, or habitat

Most properties benefit from more than one of these outcomes.

Being clear about purpose ensures your shelterbelt is designed intentionally rather than reactively.

PART 5.

THE #1 DESIGN PRINCIPLE: FILTER, DON'T WALL

Effective shelter is partially porous. It allows some airflow to pass through while reducing overall wind energy.

A completely solid barrier forces wind upward, creating acceleration and turbulence on the leeward side.

This can result in:

- Increased plant damage
- Uneven shelter
- Structural stress
- Short, gusty calm zones

Porous shelter works differently.

A layered planting of shrubs, small trees, and canopy species slows airflow progressively. Wind loses energy as it moves through foliage, creating a broader and more stable protected zone.

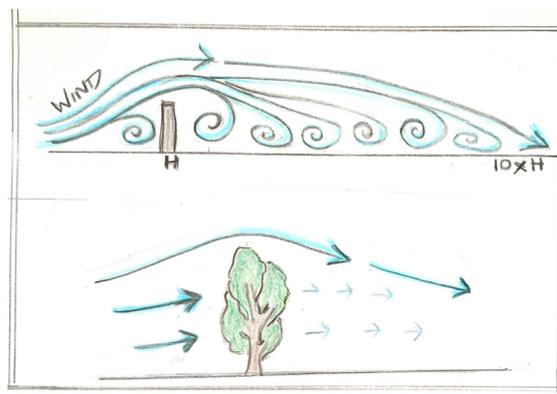


Fig. 3. Turbulence vs filtered wind.

Porosity does not mean visible gaps between trees. It refers to structure. Layered vegetation filters wind naturally, producing more reliable long-term outcomes.

When designing shelter, the goal is not to **block** wind, but **manage** it.

PART 6.

PLACEMENT - WHERE TO PUT IT?

The effectiveness of a shelterbelt depends heavily on where it is **placed**, not just what species are planted.

Even a well-designed planting will underperform if it is positioned in the wrong location.

Thoughtful placement ensures the shelter protects the areas that matter most while supporting long-term land use goals.

Start with the wind direction that matters most

Every property experiences **prevailing winds**, along with occasional strong seasonal storms. Identify the wind direction that causes the greatest impact on your land and prioritise shelter placement along that boundary. Establishing shelter on the **windward side** of the area you want to protect provides the greatest benefit.

Generally, in Aotearoa, the first priority is shelter along exposed western or southerly boundaries, although the exact direction varies depending on local conditions. A quick Google search will provide insight on the prevailing winds in your area, however, observation is key.

How wind moves across your property during storms will provide valuable guidance.

Protect the assets first

Shelter placement should begin with the areas that are most sensitive or most valuable.

These commonly include:

- Homes, cabins, and outdoor living areas
- Vegetable gardens and orchards
- Young tree plantings
- Livestock shelter zones and paddocks
- Water infrastructure and accessways

By protecting these key assets early, you improve comfort, productivity, and long-term system stability across the property.

Avoid unnecessary shading

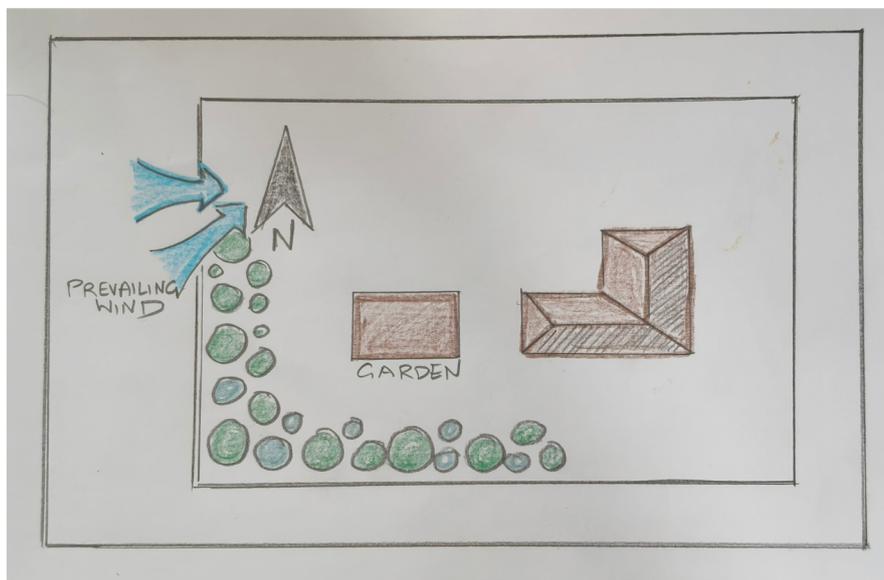
While shelter is essential, it should be positioned carefully so that it does not excessively shade gardens, orchards, or solar infrastructure. In many cases, this means placing shelter slightly offset from growing areas or selecting species and layouts that balance wind protection with sunlight access.

Extend shelter beyond the area being protected

Wind often curves around the ends of shelterbelts if they stop too abruptly. Extending the planting slightly beyond the target protection zone helps maintain consistent shelter across the entire area and reduces edge effects.

Build outward over time

Shelter does not need to be established everywhere at once. Begin by protecting the most exposed boundaries and high-value areas, then gradually expand shelter lines as resources allow. This staged approach steadily improves growing conditions while spreading costs and labour over time.



PART 7.

SPACING & ROWS (SIMPLE RULES OF THUMB)

Once location is established, the next design decision is structure.

The number of rows in a shelterbelt plays a major role in how effective it will be. While species selection and maintenance matter, row configuration often determines whether shelter performs adequately or exceptionally.

The right choice depends on wind severity, space, and long-term goals.

Single-row shelter

A single row of trees or shrubs can provide useful protection in specific situations, particularly where space is limited or rapid establishment is needed.

Advantages

- Lower planting cost
- Faster and simpler to install
- Suitable for small gardens, house protection, or narrow boundaries

Limitations

- Provides narrower shelter coverage
- More vulnerable to gaps if individual trees fail
- Less resilient in very strong wind zones

Single rows work best where wind exposure is moderate and the protected area is relatively small.

Two to three rows

A two- or three-row shelterbelt provides a strong balance between performance and practicality. This layout allows for layered planting, combining shrubs and trees of different heights to create more stable wind filtration.

Advantages

A two- or three-row shelterbelt provides a strong balance between performance and practicality. This layout allows for layered planting, combining shrubs and trees of different heights to create more stable wind filtration.

- Significantly improved wind reduction
- Greater long-term resilience if some plants fail
- Allows mixing of pioneer, canopy, and understory species
- Still manageable in terms of cost and maintenance

Multi-row shelterbelts

For many lifestyle blocks and small farms, this configuration offers the most practical long-term solution.

Multi-row shelterbelts are the most effective option for highly exposed properties or large-scale wind protection. Additional rows create deeper shelter, better structural stability, and increased ecological benefits.

Advantages

- Strong protection in severe wind environments
- Improved habitat and biodiversity
- Greater long-term durability
- Opportunity for productive layers such as fodder, coppice, or firewood species

These systems require more planning and space but deliver the most reliable results over time.

General spacing considerations

Spacing between rows should allow room for each species to reach maturity without excessive competition, while still forming a continuous sheltered structure.

Within rows, plant spacing is usually determined by the mature canopy size of the species selected. Slightly staggered planting between rows often improves wind filtration and long-term stability.

Choosing the appropriate number of rows at the beginning reduces the need for later redesign and helps ensure the shelterbelt performs as intended for decades.

PART 8

HEIGHT & LENGTH: MAKE IT WORK PROPERLY

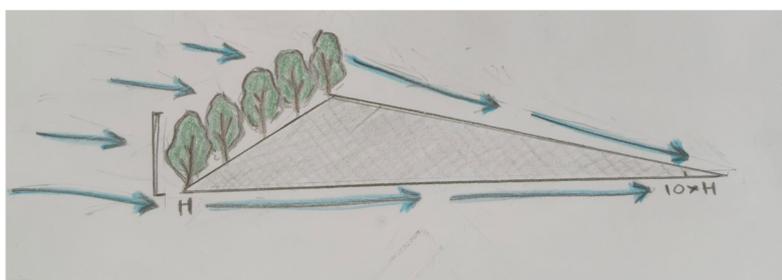
Two of the most important factors in shelterbelt performance are **height** and **length**.

Even well-spaced plantings using suitable species may deliver limited results if the shelterbelt is too short, too low, or poorly positioned relative to the area being protected.

Height determines the size of the sheltered zone

The protective effect of a shelterbelt increases as trees grow taller.

Wind reduction occurs not only immediately behind the planting, but across a zone extending many times the height of the trees.



As the shelterbelt matures, the protected area expands, improving growing conditions over time.

Because height develops gradually, early establishment planning is important.

Using a combination of **fast-growing pioneer** species and **longer-lived canopy trees** helps create early protection while ensuring strong long-term performance.

Length matters just as much as height

Shelterbelts should extend **beyond the edges of the area being protected.**

If the planting stops too soon, wind can flow around the ends of the shelterbelt and reduce its effectiveness, creating exposed “edge zones” where protection drops sharply.

Extending the shelter line past the protected area helps maintain consistent wind reduction across the entire zone and prevents wind from wrapping around the ends.

Plan for future size, not just planting size

Young shelter plantings often look small relative to the landscape, but within several years they may reach significant height and spread.

Designing with mature dimensions in mind helps avoid later shading conflicts, overcrowding, or the need for major restructuring.

Long-term planning ensures the shelterbelt continues to perform effectively as it develops.

YOU'RE NOW READY TO PLAN

By this point, you understand:

- The difference between a windbreak and a shelterbelt
- Why porous shelter outperforms solid barriers
- How height influences the sheltered zone
- Why length prevents wind from wrapping around
- Where placement matters most
- How row structure affects long-term performance

You're not guessing, You're planning.

Before planting, take a moment to clarify the following.

Autumn Shelter Planning Checklist

Use this as a simple starting point:

- Identify the wind direction causing the greatest impact
- Mark the windward boundary of the area you want to protect
- Define what you are protecting (garden, orchard, stock, home)
- Estimate the width of the area needing shelter
- Decide whether a windbreak or multi-row shelterbelt is appropriate
- Confirm that planned shelter will extend beyond the protected zone
- Consider long-term height at maturity
- Check for potential shading conflicts

You do not need every detail finalised before planting.

But clarity on direction, purpose, and scale prevents costly redesign later

A Practical Next Step

If you are establishing shelter this autumn:

Start with your most exposed and most valuable area.

You can always extend outward over time.

Good shelter is built progressively.

If You'd Like Further Guidance

This guide covers foundational design principles.

Additional guides are in development, on topics including:

- Species selection for NZ conditions
- Shelter for erosion-prone land
- Integrating shelter into food forests

For more information on our guides, upcoming courses, or for one-on-one support in planning shelter specific to your property, you can learn more at: www.foodscapes.nz