

Edible landscaping

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January 11, 2008



Add edible plants to your yard for visual appeal and a tasty harvest.

From ancient history to the recent past, people grew vegetable gardens, tended berry patches and kept orchards as significant sources of produce with which to stock their home pantries. After World War II, a change in the U.S. occurred for several reasons, including the increased efficiencies of agriculture and transportation. Most fruits and vegetables grown anywhere in the world are available in major grocery stores all over the country year-round. Coupled with a trend toward a more suburban lifestyle that emphasized manicured lawns and showy ornamentals, this diminished the importance of growing one's own food. Many fruiting trees were bred to produce abundant blossoms rather than fruit.

Today, however, an increasing number of homeowners are finding their way back to the basics, adding edible plants to their landscapes to help supplement their diets with fresh foods that look great in the yard. You, too, can create a unique, beautiful look in your landscape while enjoying the satisfaction of growing a few interesting items that may end up on your dinner plate.

Rhubarb

This beautiful, easy-to-grow plant thrives in the Pacific Northwest. Rhubarb is a perennial (it will die back each winter and reappear each spring), with edible (tart!), green-to-red stems for pies, sauces, cakes, jams and wine, as well as huge, red-veined leaves that give your spring garden an exotic, tropical look. Be aware, though: The stems are edible, but the leaves are poisonous. These plants bloom long-stalked flowers in the summer, which should be cut off to concentrate the plant's energy in the stalks and leaves, although you also can use them in arrangements. Rhubarb plants easily grow in containers or may be a striking addition to herbaceous or flower beds.



photo by Susan Carter

With its elephantine leaves and tart, tasty stalks, rhubarb makes an easy-growing addition to your landscape. Give rhubarb plenty of room to grow—and don't eat the leaves; they're poisonous.

Nasturtium

Speaking of flowers, the leaves, seed pods and blossoms of nasturtiums are edible. Nasturtiums are annual plants that grow well with other edibles such as lettuce, spinach, chard and strawberries. They also are successful as flower borders, in containers or rambling along rock walls. Nasturtium flowers come in a variety of colors ranging from light cream and yellow to deep reds. The flowers and young leaves may be used raw to add a spicy flavor to salads. There is at least one recipe for “Nasturtium Seed Capers,” which calls for preserving young seed pods in a vinegar solution (see sidebar).



photo by Jason Miller

Nasturtium blossoms (bright orange flowers in foreground) lend a slightly peppery flavor to salads. Nasturtium leaves and seeds are edible, too.

Summer squash

Other annual plants that produce beautiful edible flowers as well as fruits are summer squash varieties. These plants require a fair amount of room, but may be planted as a border around a patio, stone walkway, on a hillside, or spilling out of a raised bed or container. One or two plants may be sufficient for a household, since summer squash can be a legendary producer of fruits under the right conditions. However, proliferation of fruits may be managed somewhat by eating the blossoms, which are delicious deep-fried Italian style or raw in a green salad. If you manage to leave some of the flowers to develop into fruits, pick them while they are still bite-sized or slice them if they appear to grow exponentially overnight. The young fruits are wonderful in a quick stir-fry with olive oil, basil, and garlic. Older, larger fruits may be grated into soups, stews, stir-fries, cake batter, muffins, cookies or quick breads.

Herbs

Planting a small herb garden as a border or in a container, or grown in spaces between the roses, for instance, is an easy way to fill in your beds and add fresh flavor to any meal. The easiest method is to mix the seeds of dill, cilantro, basil, parsley and chives and sow them wherever a little room is available, though basil seems to be more productive if it doesn't have to compete with other herbs. These plants are particularly useful if they are planted near the kitchen. Snip a handful of mixed herbs to toss into scrambled eggs on a weekend morning. Do the same to add flavor to potatoes, pasta, fish, vegetable

dishes, salad dressings, stuffing and soups. Herbs continue to grow after harvest, though reseedling may be necessary several times a year for a continual harvest. For a winter crop of herbs, sow seeds in an indoor pot or continue to use the outdoor herbs that were sown in the autumn.

Edible “fences”

Another way to add edibles to landscaping is to plant dwarf fruit trees and fruiting shrubs as a kind of fence or barrier. These types of plants take a long time to develop into effective barriers and are much more work than other edible annuals and perennials, but the reward is a unique dimension to your landscape, as well as an edible harvest that may be worth the time and effort.



photo by Jason Miller

Unusual choices

Other interesting edibles to consider for your landscape might be cardoons and artichokes, which are members of the thistle family. These plants have attractive gray foliage and grow 5 to 8 feet tall. Both produce large, purple, thistle-like flowers. The stems of cardoons are edible, but must be peeled and blanched. The edible part of the artichoke is the mature flower bud, which is delicious steamed and served with melted butter or an herbed mayonnaise dressing. Onions and garlic produce beautiful round flowers on single stalks that are wonderful additions to arrangements while the bulbs are flavorful additions to most meals.

Placement, care and feeding

Edible landscaping can be more than planting a vegetable garden in straight rows. Consider mixing common garden vegetables and herbs in your flower beds or as borders. Add a tropical or exotic look by planting rhubarb and edible perennials from the thistle family. Plant strawberries among the roses. Plant red lettuces and rainbow chard with bulbs. Plant climbers such as cucumbers, peas, and beans on vertical features. Add asparagus as a background to a perennial bed. Research which blossoms are edible for lively additions to green salads.

Most edibles are successful in mulched, prepared beds or even in containers. Water them like you would your other landscaping; i.e., if rain is scarce, watering may be necessary. As a word of caution, be careful applying lawn and ornamental-type chemicals to the edibles as they may kill the broadleaf

plants. Furthermore, these types of chemicals may not be suitable for plants that are intended for your dinner table.

The choices for adding edibles into your landscape are unlimited. All you need to do is peruse the seed catalogs as they populate your mailbox this winter. Then use your imagination for next spring and your landscape will become as tasty as it is visually tantalizing.

Nasturtium seed capers

Ready to try something different? Replace your commercially processed, bottle capers with this quick and easy recipe, using nasturtium seeds.

Ingredients:

Nasturtium seeds (freshly picked and not sprayed with any chemicals)
White vinegar
Salt
Peppercorns

Combine 2½ cups of vinegar in a saucepan. Add 3 teaspoons of salt and 6 peppercorns. Bring to a boil, then cool. Strain liquid.

Gather young nasturtium seeds as soon as the blossoms fall and before the seeds get hard. Drop them into the prepared vinegar solution and let stand at least two days before using them.

Source: www.recipegoldmine.com

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