

The Edible Garden

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Beauty and bounty thriving together

An edible garden may be high on your wish list among other purposeful gardens in your home landscape. No wonder: Its existence goes way back to pre-historic era, as a benchmark of the development of human civilization just like harnessing fire, inventing the wheel and domesticating animals.

Home-grown food offers many benefits, such as 1) freshness for taste and nutrition, 2) less food-safety concerns from pesticides and preservatives, 3) lower cost than store-bought produce, 4) choices for heirloom varieties not found in grocery stores, 5) resource conservation (nothing is more “local” than your backyard), 6) exercise and fresh air from working in the garden, 7) learning and connecting with family members, especially children, 8) sharing the harvest with friends, neighbors and the community and 9) becoming more self-reliant and ecologically-conscious.

Your edible garden does not need to be kept separate from the rest of your landscape. It can be integrated into the yard and become an “edible landscape.” By combining food plants within an ornamental setting, your landscape can be both pretty and productive, allowing you to “eat your yard.”

A successful edible garden begins with planning. The first question you should ask is: What to grow? The answers would depend on 1) the favorites of the family, 2) the highest values from the crops and 3) the varieties suitable for your local climate. Based on your decisions, you will determine the space and time needed. A year-round calendar would also be helpful to ensure that necessary tasks are carried out at the best time.

Categories of edible plants include vegetables, herbs, and fruits (berries, grapes, and fruit trees), which may be grown in separate locations according to their unique needs or combined in edible-landscape arrangements.

Most vegetables are annuals, including cool-season and warm-season crops. Some cool-season vegetables can be grown before the last-frost date in the spring or after the first-frost date in the fall. They are grown for edible leaves or roots (arugula, beet, cabbage, carrot, celery, chive, garlic, kohlrabi, leek, lettuce, mustard, potato, radish, rhubarb, spinach, Swiss chard, and turnip), for immature flowers (artichokes, broccoli, and cauliflower), or for edible seeds (pea and broad bean). Some can even overwinter.

In western Skagit County, the average first-frost date occurs October 15 to November 1, and the average last-frost date occurs April 15 to May 1. Simple greenhouse or hoop structures, as well as other techniques, can be used to extend the season.



A creative raised-bed herb garden in terraced side yard, replacing retaining walls. *Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Some perennial vegetables can be harvested year-after-year with proper care. They include artichoke, asparagus, globe artichoke, horseradish, and rhubarb.

The warm-season vegetables should not be planted too early or subjected to the slightest frost. They include bean, sweet corn, cucumber, edamame, eggplant, melon, okra, pepper, pumpkin, squash, sweet potato, and tomato. And they typically require warmer temperatures to thrive and a longer growing season to mature.

A sunny location, with eight hours or more of direct sun would be ideal for vegetable production. A higher ground is preferred to avoid drainage issues and the settling of cold air that shortens the production season. The growing beds could be unframed or framed raised beds, or a combination with containers. In all cases, soil amended with organic matter is a must. Mulching with compost is very beneficial, and an irrigation system should be part of the plan.

On the other hand, the herb garden may have less stringent requirements for soil and irrigation. The herb plants tend to be more drought-tolerant. They can usually be more easily blended into the existing landscape and are more suitable for containers as well. Their use may be culinary, cosmetic, medicinal, and craft. They may be annuals, perennials, shrubs, and trees. The common

herb plants include basil, bay laurel, borage, catnip, dill, lemon balm, oregano, mint, parsley, perilla, rosemary, sage, scented geranium, and thyme.

The berry crops to be considered may include blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, currants and gooseberries, grapes, kiwifruit, lingonberries, elderberries, highbush cranberries, Saskatoon berries, and chokeberries. Because they are long-term crops, plan their space as an investment in the future. Consider locations for sunlight, soil preparation for fertility and weed elimination, certified disease-free plants, trellis systems (if necessary), irrigation, regular training, pruning and caring, and harvesting methods.



Early-spring vegetable crop in raised beds (broad bean and lettuce). *Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

The edible garden may include a small home orchard with several varieties of dwarf fruit trees. The choices may include apples, cherries, pears, peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums, and nuts. The selections are usually based on flavor, harvest period, disease resistance, vigor ratings, and pollination requirements.

The espaliered form of fruit trees is an excellent way to grow fruits. Such tree structure would serve as natural “room dividers,” enhancing the beauty and functionality of the edible garden.

An ideal “purposeful” edible garden may be sited on the north or west side of the property. The orchard may be located the farthest away and form a backdrop for the garden. The berry patch would be in the middle, and the vegetable and herb patch the closest.

In summary, healthy plants are beautiful plants—choose the right plant for the right place and have a plan to care for them. The value of a landscape is its offering of positive sensory experience. By adding an edible component in the makeup of your gardens, the landscape will finally nurture all the senses and reward you with a wonderful experience that beauty and bounty are thriving together.

RESOURCES:

- *Edible Gardening for Washington and Oregon.* Marianne Binetti and Alison Beck. Lone Pine Publishing International, 2010.
- *Herb Gardening for Washington and Oregon.* Marianne Binetti and Laura Peters. Lone Pine Publishing International, 2008.

- ***Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades: The Complete Guide to Organic Gardening.*** Steve Solomon, 6th Edition. Sasquatch Books, 2007.
- ***Fruit Handbook for Western Washington: Varieties and Culture.*** G. A. Moulton and J. King. Washington State University Extension, 2013.
- ***Vegetable Gardening in Washington State.*** <http://gardening.wsu.edu/vegetable-gardens/>
- ***Fruits and Berries: The Basics of Growing at Home.*** Chuck McClung. Grow Northwest Magazine. March 10, 2013. <http://www.grownorthwest.com/2013/03/fruits-and-berries-the-basics-of-growing-at-home/>
- ***How to Plan a Vegetable Garden.*** Ruth Lively. Fine Gardening Magazine, Issue 90. <http://www.finegardening.com/how-plan-vegetable-garden>