

Creating a Potager Garden

by Rebecca Brown

We humans have been creating gardens around our homes for thousands of years. Historically, gardens have taken many forms, and recreating them can be a fascinating challenge.

One form of garden design can be very functional in our modern-day gardens. The potager is a marvelous blending of flowers, herbs, and vegetables. The word potager is French and means “a thick soup,” the idea being that everything for the soup can be found in one garden. The earliest documentation of this form of garden comes from a design plan dating from the 10th century in France for a simple, utilitarian garden in a monastery. It was a simple plan with small (5 foot) beds laid out in a grid with pathways in between. Each bed was meant to contain a single herb or vegetable. The potager garden gradually became more complicated in its plantings but the grid-like layout persisted.



By the height of the Renaissance, this humble kitchen garden had evolved into a pleasure garden as well as a productive source of food for the kitchens of the wealthy. For the ordinary householder, however, the potager was still a simple source for all the horticultural needs of the family. Today the potager garden style provides an exciting opportunity to design your own garden providing beauty as well as produce.

The first thing to do in creating a potager is to decide where you are going to locate your garden. It really can be as small or as large as you choose. Next, have fun designing the layout for your beds and pathways. If you aren't the designing type, start with a simple cross of pathways and locate your beds where they will fit. Make sure you allow space in between the beds for walkways. Beds should be narrow enough for you to reach the center to plant, weed, and harvest your bounty. Beds can be raised or not depending on what you want. Raised beds were not uncommon in medieval potager gardens, often bordered with woven strips of willow branches, and they can be a blessing to aging knees and backs. When you have a plan you like, it's time to begin layout.

A tape measure, some stakes and string are all you need. Start with a simple cross, two perpendicular lines across length and width of your plot, and then continue laying out your design until you are satisfied. Make sure that your beds will have as much sunlight as possible.

Most vegetable crops need a good amount of sun. Don't despair if parts of your plot are shady, many herbs, flowers and even some vegetables can be quite happy with some shade.

Next, plan your hardscape, pathways, boundaries, bed walls, etc. Bricks or gravel are common choices for pathways although simpler and more cost-effective paths can be made from a layer of weed barrier topped with a thick layer of bark or mulch, or even straw.

When your garden is laid out and beds are located, it's time to prepare the beds and begin your planting. Now it really gets exciting. You are the artist, and this is your canvas. You get to create a masterpiece.

There are no rules about what to plant but there is one thing to think about when choosing your flowers, make sure that everything in this garden is edible and no toxic plants are included. If you are not sure what common garden plants might be dangerous to consume, there is a helpful guide reference listed below.



You might like to start with your anchor plants; small fruit trees were common. If you want any rose bushes or fruit bushes like currants, raspberries, gooseberries or blackberries, now is the time to plant them. Pomegranates and figs would be appropriate as well. If you can't grow them outside where you live in the winter, consider growing small trees in large pots that can be moved to shelter for coldest months. Strategically placed pots can really add to the look of your Potager. Bear in mind that some berry bushes can spread like wildfire

and will need constant care to keep them in their places. Generally, unless you are a skilled gardener, a more polite plant would be a better choice. Although there are no rules for potagers, a symmetrical layout with defined borders and walkways will convey the potager feeling better. Borders of herbs or boxwood give it that medieval touch.

A potager garden is the perfect place to try out your companion planting. Many herbs and flowers can have beneficial effects on other plants. Coriander can help to control carrot fly; marigolds or basil planted with your tomatoes can control thrips; and nasturtiums planted with squash and cucumbers are used to control beetles. A reference for companion planting is listed below.

Many common garden flowers are edible as well as beautiful: borage, lavender, nasturtiums, and violets are often added to salads or desserts.

Vegetables can often be not only delicious, but lovely additions to your garden palette as well. Many kale varieties are very eye catching. Cabbages, lettuces, carrots, beans, squash, and pumpkins are all perfect for your garden. Pumpkins grow quite large so place them carefully. There are many smaller varieties which can be trained to grow vertically on a trellis as well.

Tying together the vegetables and flowers is the third plant group for your garden: herbs. Used historically for many things from killing fleas to flavoring soups there are herb plants for any spot you have left in your garden. Typical herbs to plant in a potager would be rosemary, lavender, tarragon, marjoram, sorrel, germander, thyme, and basil just to name a few. The list is very long, and the choice is all yours.

There is no right or wrong when creating a potager garden; there is only what pleases you and feeds your family. Why not create something splendid that brings produce to your table and smiles to your family.

Included are some references that may help in creating your potager garden:

<https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/planting-vegetable-garden>

https://ucanr.edu/sites/poisonous_safe_plants/Toxic_Plants_by_Scientific_Name_685/

<https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/companion-planting-home-gardens>