



Edible Ornamentals: Landscape Your Lunch

With the increased availability of colorful vegetable hybrids and heirlooms, more and more people are reconsidering the typical divisions found in most backyard gardens. Instead of relegating all edibles to one massive vegetable bed, why not interweave your favorite roots, greens and fruiting plants in among your ornamental trees, shrubs and perennials? You may also wish to consider adding fruiting trees, vines and shrubs – all part this unique way of gardening – edible landscaping!

It's up to you how much you wish to renovate your landscaping. At one end of the spectrum are the proponents of **Permaculture**, a philosophy to organize outdoor spaces to maximize resources for sustainable human sustenance (usually including poultry and/or livestock as part of the continuum) and where selection of plants is weighted toward the **useful**. On a more modest scale, the desire to "eat local" can transform your purely ornamental garden by adding in a few colorful peppers or eggplants or planting lettuce, kale, and edible flowers. As you combine your gardens, you'll also be combining tasks necessary to tend your plants. When space and time are at a premium, "mixing it up" makes a lot of sense. In addition, a rich biodiversity in your backyard can emulate Nature herself by creating landscapes where plants support and complement each other and the menace of pests and diseases are reduced. Remember to look for disease-resistant varieties and to use organic methods throughout so you'll be confident that your garden will nourish you at the same time it enhances your living space.

designing your edible landscape

- Think about what you love to eat and what fruits, berries, roots, and vegetables you'd most like to have.
- Take into consideration the space needed and cultural requirements of your choices as well as the time you and your family have available. "Mixing it up" in an organized way will reduce the necessity of doubling resources and duplicating tasks.
- Not starting with an empty canvas? Incorporate the existing trees and ornamentals you love into your plan or move them to accommodate your changes. Don't forget that your garden is a reflection of your tastes as well as your hunger.
- Hardscape structures – raised beds, arbors, trellises and paths – will organize your plan as well as help you make decisions on where to site your edibles and ornamentals. For instance, annual vines (peas, beans, cucumbers) are happy with temporary trellises, but they can just as easily share the permanent structures that are needed for grape vines or espaliered fruit trees.
- Next, site your largest plants – the fruiting trees and shrubs – that will form the permanent background for the perennial and annual plantings. How about a row of columnar apple tree or a few berry bushes with colorful foliage as well as fruit?
- Containers will increase your usable space, add flexibility and provide a home for tropical edibles such as pomegranates, citrus and fig trees that winter inside your home or in a greenhouse.
- Edible landscaping is also an opportunity to plant perennial herbs and vegetables which need permanent site and don't like the perpetual cultivation of annual beds. Your coneflowers will be happy to share space with sorrel, rhubarb, and asparagus!
- As for annuals - "greens" are not just for the vegetable patch anymore! Their varied colors and textures, speedy growth and carefree habits make them great companions for flowering annuals. Try a border of beet greens and chicory around your herb garden or add colorful mizuna or red romaine to contrast with your million-bells and petunias. Many favorite vegetables such as beans, peas, okra and eggplant have blooms that can compete with more conventional flowerbed choices. Tasty quinoa can replace celosia, and shiso and purple orach are just as decorative as coleus.
- Speaking of flowers – why not add some edible flowers such as nasturtium, viola, or calendula? Rugosa roses are noted for their hips which provide Vitamin C as well as jam and tea. Winter songbirds will also eat rosehips – and why not add food for them in your garden too? You may be a permaculturist after all!