



A French Potager : Cultivating Good Taste

Let's all say «vive les potagers!» And why not? Seven out of ten French citizens have one – and enjoy the abundance, variety, and freshness of the vegetables, fruits, flowers and herbs that grow within easy reach of their kitchens. At the same time, they benefit from the color, beauty, and exuberance of these palettes of personal expression – pieces of living artwork. Extraordinary examples of over-the-top kitchen gardens are well-known tourist magnets in France: “le Potager du Roi” – the King’s Kitchen Garden at Versailles; the elaborately designed vegetable gardens of the chateaux along the Loire River – most notably at Chateau Villandry; and the recreated medieval monk’s gardens found in abbeys and priories open to the public. In fact, many parks all over France include potager gardens, even “le Jardin de Bagatelle” in the Bois de Boulogne and the Tuileries in Paris! Principally this is because these gardens are seen as beautiful as well as practical. Some are maintained just for their beauty such as at Chateau Villandry, with its nine gardeners who regularly replace the vegetables to keep the display colorful, but most are harvested with care and delight by people who value good taste in all its multiple connotations!

Principals of the Potager

Why is a potager so appealing to all of our senses? What are the basic elements necessary to recreate – even on a small scale – the beautiful gardens of France? Even the backyard potagers of ordinary households in France share some design elements with the formal chateau gardens. Make your own choices depending on your available space:

- Proximity and connection between the home and the garden – by using similar hard-scape material, colors, and textures that mirror the principle features of the home;
- A strong axis of symmetry centered on the home with a balanced arrangement of features on either side of that axis;
- Pathways which radiate from a central feature: a fountain, pool, sculpture, tree, or a circular or diamond shaped bed;
- An orderly layout of geometrically shaped beds, often raised above the level of the path with containing walls or low hedges, with a clearly visible pattern when viewed from various aspects;
- Combining perennials, evergreens, specimen trees and shrubs so that they frame the basic design and give the garden a living presence in the winter;
- Trellises, arbors, or *tuteurs* which give height and variety to the beds; and
- An enclosure around the entire garden, which might be formed by free-standing walls or the walls of the home or outbuildings, hedges, espaliered fruit trees, trellised vines and roses, or a combination of these.

In addition, the strict geometry of the overall design is married to the complex variation of the vivid colors and rich textures of the plants used. A few tips to get your artistic juices going:

- *Spacing*: French gardeners are masters of the use of space, using every corner available, and planting very tightly. The plants are not crowded – each has the correct amount of room – but with no empty earth showing, the effect is lush and verdant. In the United States this dense planting (with less emphasis on design) is known as Square Foot Gardening. For specifics of square foot plant spacing, please see the our tip sheet: *Vegetables by Season*.

- *A Quilt of Vegetables*: Think about the colors, textures, height, and habit of each type of plant as you combine them. Use repeating patterns and symmetry in your garden plan to emphasize their contrasts and harmonies.
- *Edible Flowers and Herb* add additional color and are great companions for vegetables – attracting beneficial insects for pollination. Interplant vegetables with the annuals while placing the perennials in borders, corners or separate beds.
- *Endless Variations on the Theme*: Experiment each year, trying new combinations and collecting favorite varieties to use again, while always emphasizing visual appeal as well as superior taste.

A potager is an exercise in patience, dedication, and personal expression. Abundance and beauty are combined with practicality to please you visually at the same time you fill your kitchen with nourishing food. But the true secret of a classic potager's allure may be hidden in its history. Above all, it is a garden of meaning. Its roots are in the religious symbolism and devotion of the Middle Ages, the idea that by cultivating beauty and fecundity on a tiny raised-up piece of earth, the gardener might also raise his soul up to the heavens, feeding himself both physically and spiritually. That may be why, in combining an easier way to work with an appealing place to flourish alongside your plants, a potager could be just what the doctor ordered in this world of stress and pain.

Essential Elements of French Intensive Gardening

- *Plan your design to include* full sun, proximity to the kitchen, and a balanced design of landscape elements for a permanent presence with enough room for your chosen plantings of vegetables, herbs, flowers, and fruiting trees and shrubs. Remember to provide an easy access to water to keep irrigation tasks easy during hot and dry times.
- *Raised beds* may be framed with wood, stone, or other material. An alternative would be to mound up the soil into unframed berms. Don't make your beds any wider than 4' so you will be able to garden without leaving the path. A good suggestion would be 3' x 12' for each bed, with a depth of 1½ to 2 feet.
- *Prepare your Beds*: Scalp or remove turf-grass; dig out perennial weeds; loosen the soil if it's really compacted. Build your berms or fill your raised beds with native soil amended with compost and *Turface* to ensure good drainage.
- *Surround your beds* with paths of grass, gravel, or mulch – the main path(s) should be 3' wide but smaller paths can be 1' wide. Consider the maintenance tasks attached to each type of path material – you probably do not have nine gardeners on staff to pull weeds, hand-clip grass or rake gravel!
- *Intercropping* can be part of the overall design, providing crop benefits as well as visual interest, for example: interspersing deep-rooted crops with more shallow-rooted plants; using taller plants to provide shade for shorter crops which in turn keep down competing weeds; or using plants to provide support structures for vining crops.
- *Start your own seeds* and you'll have a continual source of transplants.
- *Succession Planting*: Some vegetables, such as Swiss chard and pole beans, occupy a space and are harvested throughout the growing season. Others, such as broccoli and spinach, will leave space once spring is through. Replace these spring crops with hot weather crops to keep beds full and productive. Some spring crops will also return in fall!
- *Harvest and Replace*: Even on an individual plant basis, there is no reason to leave holes in your garden: when you pick a head of lettuce, pop in another transplant in the same space or when you pull some carrots, sow more seed in the hole.
- *Continuous Harvest*: Some vegetables like radishes, cilantro or bush beans mature quickly and are then harvested. With a little planning, these may be sown at 2- or 3-week intervals to have a staggered crop. Planting different cultivars of the same crop which have early, mid-season and late maturity dates is another way to provide a continuous harvest.
- *Intensive spacing* means mulching and feeding the soil with compost every year, catching any weeds at the seedling stage before they can provide any competition and regular harvesting to keep fruiting plants producing.
- *Enjoy your Garden!* It will be so beautiful you'll want to be there even when you're not gardening – and your gardening will be a joyful and peaceful pleasure instead of a chore!