

Garden Variety

The time is ripe for edible landscaping

By Phyllis Gricus | Photos provided by Rosalind Creasy, unless otherwise noted



“The economy sprouts more interest in home vegetable growing, seed companies report record sales.” “Healthy eating: fruits and vegetables, more matters” “Top reasons to eat organic” ♦ If recent headlines have you pondering the idea of growing food but you don’t think you have room for a garden—think differently! ♦ Integrating edible plants into your existing landscape is easy. Fruit trees can be grown as large shade producing trees or trained as fences on an espalier. Combining perennials with annual greens can embellish a flower bed and provide fresh, nutritious salads for many months. Fill pots with colorful kales, culinary herbs, and heirloom tomatoes. Keep them near the kitchen for convenient harvesting. Edibles will not only enhance your landscape, but also provide healthy food for the family, especially when paired with organic gardening practices.

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Victory garden 2.0

The resurgence of edible landscaping and the increased recognition of the health, environmental, and other benefits of growing your own food are encouraging to Rosalind Creasy, a pioneer in the field. She literally wrote the book on it over twenty-five years ago: *The Complete Book of Edible Landscaping* revolutionized the way many people think about gardening. A revised and updated edition will be out soon.

“This is not your grandparents’ vegetable garden,” opined Creasy, “where the edibles are relegated to a utilitarian area in the back yard, tied up with old pantyhose and zucchini is left to mildew on the vine.”

Growing food crops can be part of an aesthetically pleasing design. “You can make it look beautiful all the time, just not the same all the time,” stated Creasy. Much like you choose ornamental plants for succession of blooms you can do the same with edibles. Break the mold; plant lettuce as a cover for spring blooming bulbs. Substitute the lettuce when it’s done, with peppers or eggplants.

Food and function

Edible landscaping replaces plants that are strictly ornamental with plants that produce food. Start with plants you like to eat before branching out. Do you like blueberries? Replace your ho-hum privet hedge with an easy to grow blueberry. The blueberry shrub brings a unique combination of delicious fruit and striking ornamental beauty. Choose varieties that ripen at different times to extend your harvest. And, allow at least two plants for each blueberry lover in the family.

The peach tree is admired as much for its beauty and fragrant blossom as it is for its fruit—nothin’ beats the flavor of a fresh ripened peach! Why have a flowering ornamental shade tree when a peach tree offers so much more?

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OPPOSITE:
Chamomile, lettuces,
rosemary, red basil,
pimento peppers and bit-
termelon on trellis

RIGHT:
Spring greens garden
with lettuce, pac choi,
scallions, kale, red mus-
tard and peas on trellis



The stunning hardy kiwi vine can climb over twenty feet a season along an arbor or trellis. Kiwi is a vigorous grower, so your support should be sturdy. The fragrant, white flowers make it an asset in the spring landscape. In order to get both flowers and fruit you'll need male and female plants. And no, the fruit won't look like the furry ones you get at the market. The sweet berry-sized fruit can be picked from the vine and popped into your mouth.

The tidy clumps of Alpine strawberries make a great alternative groundcover or edging plant. The dark green foliage is perpetually accented with both white flowers and petite berries. And the pièce de résistance...berries that are an intensely flavored delicacy rarely found at the market.

Potted edibles of plenty

Container gardening boosts the convenience factor of edibles. To begin with, you'll extend the growing season by one to three months. Wouldn't it be a treat to harvest fresh salad greens in December? What gardener doesn't want to do less weeding? Potted plants keep weeding to a minimum. When placed in a protected place like a deck, they're less susceptible to animals that cause damage. Moreover, you can be certain the soil is non-toxic.

Clusters of different sized pots can be an element of design. Select containers that match your landscape style. Use varied sizes and shape but choose one color theme. Containers of the same color will accent the beauty of the plants and add a sense of coherence to the garden.

D. Landreth Seed Company offers a collection of vegetables uniquely suited for containers. Barbara Melera, president of D. Landreth, offers this advice for easier and more productive container gardening. Watering is time consuming so try to set up a drip

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Photo courtesy of Monrovia

LEFT:
Monrovia's Hardyblue midseason blueberry is exceptionally sweet and good for eating fresh and baking. The shrub can grow upwards of six to eight feet tall and displays white bell-shaped flowers in spring, brilliant yellow-orange fall foliage and ornamental red stems in winter.

OPPOSITE:
Strawberry jar with lettuces





irrigation system. Fertilize every two weeks with a full strength 5-10-10 fertilizer. Never use time-release fertilizer on container grown vegetables. Prevent blossom end rot on container grown tomatoes with applications of bone meal; apply at least three times every two weeks for the first six weeks of the growing season.

Because of the interest in container gardening, D. Landreth Seed Company has done all their trial gardening for the past five years in containers.

Not interested in starting from seeds? Garden Dreams Urban Farm & Nursery, in Wilkinsburg, PA has certified organic seedlings available. You can get a jump-start on the season while supporting their efforts to uplift the community.

Planting with purpose

The difference between an ornamental landscape and an edible one is that you must harvest “the fruits of your labor.” It can be very rewarding but sometimes challenging to keep up with ripening fruits and vegetables. Highly perishable crops will require either quick processing, such as freezing; or friends and neighbors to accept the abundance. Better still, you can donate your surplus to local food banks to help feed America’s hungry.

Gardening is a very creative activity and growing your own food is no exception. Developing a landscape with diverse food producing trees, shrubs, perennials and annuals adds tremendous color, texture, smells and tastes to your environment. And, in turn attracts many beneficial insects, birds, and butterflies. It adds a whole different dimension to your garden. Such a beautiful landscape nourishes both the body and the soul. 🍓

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RESOURCES:

www.rosalindcreasy.com, www.raintreenursery.com; www.mygardendreams.com, www.monrovia.com, www.landrethseeds.com

OPPOSITE:
front level: lettuces and tulips, second level: level blueberries edged with strawberries, third level: dwarf apple tree and antique irises, background: citrus tree

RIGHT:
Miniature herb garden with creeping thyme, dwarf basil, chamomile, chili peppers in square containers

