



Edible Landscaping

Try mixing beans, greens and tomatoes with ornamental plant for edible landscaping that can add interest to your garden and your table.

By Susan M. Brackney

It's time to toss out one of gardening's last unwritten rules.

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You know the one: Hide the vegetables out back, and give the strictly ornamental plants top billing along walkways and in front of the house.

There's a new aesthetic taking shape—edible landscaping.

The conscious mixing of utilitarian plants like beans, greens and tomatoes with ornamental ones is blurring the old lines between the plants we really use and those we grow simply for show.

The concept isn't exactly new. After all, we've all seen fancy cabbages and kale in cool shades of purple and teal mixed with the requisite mums of spring and fall.

Still, while they're technically edible, those brassicas probably look better than they taste. Palate-pleasing and just as attractive are heirloom varieties of kale, Swiss chard, collards and other hardy greens that readily accentuate annuals like cheery pansies and Bachelor's buttons, and they look good on a plate, too.

© Jan Day Incredible Edibles
for Beginners

Even creatures of habit can make new habits.

If you continually relegate your vegetables to the same rigid rows in out-of-the-way plots, you might want to ease your way into the edible landscape.

One simple way to start? Add a bountiful border of salad greens to your existing annual and perennial garden beds, or add a surprising dash of color with dwarf peppers and tomatoes.

For a well-defined, more formal-looking landscape, make sure the soil is level and well-cultivated before direct seeding, and use small garden stakes and twine to cordon off the edges to be planted.

What types of edibles you'll plant will depend in part on what established ornamental varieties you hope to accent. With its profusion of chocolaty-purple leaves, red Romaine lettuce deftly sets off a bed of nasturtiums in full flower, for instance.

And the ruffled look of Royal oak leaf lettuce or striking, crimson beets can add real drama to that tired stand of day lilies.

Edible selections can just as easily serve to soften hard edges in the garden and add a little sophistication to the most pedestrian of annual beds.

Present in edible landscapes largely for the texture of their foliage, fern-like carrots or feathery dill, when grown in wide bands or solid patches, really dress up the dwarf ageratum, marigolds, coleus and other annuals they surround.

Of course, those carrots along with lettuce, spinach and other cool-weather veggies will, ultimately, go to seed when the weather turns hot, but even when allowed to bolt, the remaining vegetation still can serve to shade out many summer weeds, translating to less time with the hand cultivator and hoe.



Easy to grow and somewhat heat-tolerant, Swiss chard is another good choice for edible landscape beginners. With vibrant stems of fuchsia, red, neon orange and pale yellow, Bright Lights Swiss chard is a must-have for splashes of high-impact color.

If you prefer especially tidy planting beds year-round, you can always pull up any spent spinach and lettuce plants and replace them with a few heat-loving peppers such as the bushy Tabasco chili. Growing up to 4 feet tall, Tabasco chili pepper plants produce pale-green pods that range from a warm orange to the pepper's trademark fire engine-red.

If space is a little tight, you might try something smaller, like the more compact Thai dragon chili pepper. Pretty and prolific, the Thai dragon chili grows to about 2 feet tall.

Tomatoes are another good bet for those new to the edible landscape. A couple worth noting are Yellow pear—an extremely productive and sweet-tasting heirloom cherry that will need to be caged or staked—and Red robin—a dwarf cherry that reaches just 8 to 12 inches tall and packs on tight clusters of tiny-but-serviceable red fruits.

Top In the right climates, some veggies can add a little winter interest and, as it happens, many vegetables and herbs can solve specific problems in your garden beds.

For example, because it will smother competing plants, lettuce sown thickly between established perennial flowers can cut down on the need to weed around them. Hungry for more?

Check out a few ideas (and recipes?) using weeds>>

Don't miss our recipes featuring garden-fresh herbs>> Whether it's to save on trips to the grocery, to grow more produce from less space, to try out new varieties, or to break out of a gardening rut, there are plenty of reasons to create new landscapes that are as luscious as they are lush.

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Getting Started

Before you break out your shovel, make a list of the produce you're sure you'll actually use.

After all, some purple kohlrabi or mammoth red cabbages may look stunning when paired with those Oriental poppies, but what good are they if you've never gotten the hang of preparing them in the kitchen?

In addition to your personal preferences, you'll also want to consider the preferences of the fruits and vegetables you wish to grow. Most will require at least six hours of full sun each day and at least 1 inch of water per week, and most everything will perform best when grown in well-draining soil that's rich in organic matter.

Not sure about your soil quality? You can contact your county extension office to arrange a soil assay; amend your edible landscaping beds accordingly.

Fresh compost, worm castings or sea kelp meal are just a few organic soil-building options, if needed.

Also, before growing any produce in close proximity to your home, barns or outbuildings, it's a good idea to have the surrounding soil tested for harmful levels of lead, dioxin and other harmful contaminants. Should you find a problem in a particular area, plan to stick with only ornamentals there.

As with traditional ornamental beds, the most prominent edible landscapes offer a variety of plant heights and habits, bloom times, colors and textures, but deciding just what should go where can be a little overwhelming.

Before you start any seeds or head for your favorite nursery, grab a pencil and sketch pad. Trying different ideas on paper first will save wear-and-tear on you and your plants.

Because they'll take up the most space, start with fruit or nut trees, berry-laden shrubs, and trellises for pole beans, peas and other climbing vegetables. Make a note of the height and spread of different varieties at maturity, then plan to fill in the gaps with medium- and small-sized plants.

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Trees to Try

If you're located in a warm climate, you have many fruit- and nut-tree options at your disposal: dwarf lemon trees miniature oranges peaches and even pomegranates, almonds, and figs

They all can be shaped into attractive topiaries or espaliers by more advanced landscapers.

Northerly gardeners have some toothsome choices, too, including: apples pears sour cherries mulberries persimmons paw paws

Unless you have room for multiple trees, look for "self-fruiting" varieties, which can be planted by themselves and will bear fruit via their own pollen.

Both well-suited to beginners, most apple and pear trees usually require at least one other variety to be growing nearby for cross pollination. Among the easiest fruit trees for beginners to grow, pears like the New Century Asian pear are hardy to zone 4 and are at least partially self-fruiting.

Another way to get the most out of your growing area? Opt for a dwarf or semi-dwarf tree that will produce normal-sized fruits on another, smaller tree's rootstock. While dwarf trees usually grow to between 8 and 15 feet high, semi-dwarf trees can reach 12 to 20 feet tall.

For gardeners with more room to play, the American persimmon tree is certainly worth a look. Typically hardy to zones 4 through 8, the American persimmon features blue-tinged leaves that contrast well with its orange, apricot-like fruits.

Another handsome producer, the paw paw tree grows well in Kentucky and Virginia, zones 6 and 7, respectively. It bears mango-sized fruits reminiscent of the Cavendish banana.

There's at least one highly productive tree to avoid in the edible landscape: the black walnut. To prevent competition from forest understory, the tree releases juglone, a chemical that is toxic to many plants. As a result, getting other plants to grow alongside or underneath a black walnut tree can be tricky.

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Shrubs and Climbers

Black raspberries, currants, gooseberries and even blueberries are just some of the woody shrubs that work well when mixed with ornamentals and, with the exception of blueberries, which prefer slightly acidic growing conditions, they shouldn't need any special treatment in loamy soils.

Just what will they need? Plenty of space.

Many berry-producing shrubs will grow up to 5 or 6 feet tall, but dwarf and semi-dwarf varieties are sometimes available.

For camouflaging unsightly spots or providing a little extra privacy, you can train sweet potato vines, sugar snap peas or climbing beans up a few teepee-style poles or along a high fence or wall.

Featuring deep-red and red-and-cream-colored flowers respectively, Scarlet Runner and Painted Lady are just a couple of runner bean varieties that will thrive in cooler climates or in spring or fall gardens.

Gardeners with very hot summers—especially those in the South and Southwest—will have success with East Asian long beans like the Taiwan black long bean and the Chinese red noodle bean.

True to its name, the Taiwan long bean boasts lime-green bean pods about 40 inches long with black beans inside. Nearly as dramatic, the Chinese red noodle bean produces crimson pods up to 18 inches long. (And, unlike other brightly colored bean varieties, when cooked, these pods will retain much of their color.)

For a more long-term privacy screen, gardeners in mild climates can trellis grape vines; before committing to a particular variety, contact local vintners to arrange a taste test and to find out which varieties will thrive in your area.

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Fruits and Flowers



Not all fruits need be born of vines and shrubs.

A perennial favorite, strawberries can be used to cover large, low spots, but the usual running varieties won't stay in one place for long.

For a more low-maintenance solution, you can plant alpine strawberries, which don't reproduce by way of runners. What's more, unlike June-bearing strawberries, alpine strawberries produce fruit all summer long; the berries are much smaller than those of running strawberries, but they're flavorful and sweet. Bordering a bed of Shasta daisies, baby's breath or yarrow, the alpine strawberry's glossy green leaves and bright scarlet berries really pop.

Herbs such as chamomile, thyme, rosemary and oregano may have understated flowers, but they bring an impressive range of foliage textures and colors to the table.

Pair them with silvery lamb's ear, dusty miller or caladium for a bold effect.

Even asparagus has a place in the edible landscape. Long after its tasty spears have gone, asparagus sends up arching, feathery plumes that can make a perfect backdrop for sunflowers, coreopsis or black-eyed Susans.

Some of our traditionally ornamental plants also have culinary value. Case in point: The flowers of calendula, sometimes known as pot marigold, are edible and make a somewhat spicy addition to fresh salads.

So, too, do nasturtium blooms and leaves, which grow nicely next to many varieties of basil. (Incidentally, if you plan to harvest any basil leaves for use in salads or sauces, once the plant is allowed to flower, its leaves will turn bitter. To maintain good flavor, simply pinch off any flower buds.)

Blending herbs, vegetables and fruits with tried-and-true ornamentals may feel a little bit rebellious, but it definitely has its rewards.

The unexpected combinations of color and texture range from pleasantly surprising to downright breathtaking. Best of all, edible landscapes don't just feed the gardener, they feed the soul.

About the Author: An avid gardener, Susan M. Brackney is also a beekeeper, HFH's Garden Grit columnist and author of the forthcoming book, *Plan Bee: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About the Hardest-Working Creatures on the Planet* (Perigee Books, 2009).

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