



Making an Italian Garden

Learn how to create your own Italian garden with plantings of some of your favorite Italian seasonings in your backyard.

(from Orto Italiano!, by Rick Gush, page 2 of 2)

Starting an Italian Garden

Italy is a large and diverse country, and the typical methods of growing vegetable crops are similarly diverse.

Making an “Italian” garden in the United States is just a matter of selecting a few of the classic Italian crops that appeal to your taste, and any Italian garden will certainly be different from the neighbors’.

There are a great number of nurseries and seed catalogs in the United States that offer plants and seeds of Italian vegetable varieties. One of the best is www.growitalian.com that features seeds from the Franchi seed company in northern Italy, which is the dominant brand in Italian nurseries.

Another notable site is www.italianseedandtool.com, where a very nice selection of Italian vegetable seeds is available.

One more is www.gourmetseed.com, which offers a huge selection of Italian varieties.

Italian Landscape Chic

Not all the fashionable flavoring plants in Italian cuisine come from the vegetable garden.

Olives, capers, laurel, pine nuts and saffron are all important flavors in Italian cooking, and having these seasoning plants somewhere in the landscape is an Italian tradition. Any of these five plants can be easily grown in many areas of the United States as well.

Laurel

The leaves from laurels, known as bay trees in the United States, are added to most soups and sauces, and because these trees are so widespread, the leaves are more often harvested than purchased. *Lauris nobilis* is the most common species in Italy. In the western United States, the California bay tree (*Umbellularia californica*) has a similar flavor.

Capers

Capers are another common Italian seasoning. While most Italians buy their capers, those who are fortunate enough to have a few caper plants growing out of a rock wall somewhere will harvest the flower buds before they open and cure them in vinegar or salt. Capers (*Capparis spinosa*) grow well in sunny, well-drained locations.

Olives

Making your own preserved olives is ridiculously easy, if tedious. In most parts of the United States where olives grow, they are landscape trees, and the fruit is considered undesirable. More people should harvest this urban fruit and use it.

Pine nuts

The big cones can be intimidating when they come crashing down, but it’s a definite treat to live near *Pinus pinea*, from which come most of the pine nuts in Italy. The statuesque Maritime pines are everywhere, and pine nuts are added to pastry items, as well as being a key ingredient of pesto. Most of the scrubby pinyon pines of the United States also make nice pine nuts.

Saffron

In some areas of Italy, the saffron crocus grows wild or almost wild, and gardeners in these areas can harvest the tiny stamens to make their own saffron seasoning. Saffron crocus (*Crocus sativus*) is not a wild species but the result of centuries of domestic selection in the eastern Mediterranean. In the United States, saffron cultivation was common until recently among the Pennsylvania Dutch.



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