
A four-part series written for the international online community GardeningOrganically (abbreviated "GO")

Edible Landscaping, part I

I was asked to give a talk here in my neighborhood about Edible Landscaping. The concept of Edible Landscaping might not sound too foreign to veterans on GO, but here in my very city neighborhood, it is definitely revolutionary. Edible Landscaping means landscaping your property with plants which yield food for humans. I stretch my definition a little to include herbs and beneficial plants.

The ideal landscape of my city surroundings (as likely your city too) is an impeccably tidy unnaturally-green lawn, a few precision-coiffed shrubs at the corners of the house, and a street tree (if the homeowner was unable to escape city regulations). If the homeowner "likes to garden," there will be a few outrageously bright annual flowers which smack of Miracle Gro. The image of Vegetable Patch, together with its floppy squash leaves and unkempt tomato vines, just doesn't fit.

America's preoccupation with lawn has been traced back through history to the castles and manor houses of England and France. In early fortifications, land was cleared around the castles for defense, so that they could see approaching raiders. Later, these open spaces became associated with the image of wealth - only a king or a lord could afford to hold such land without need that it bear fruit or produce a yield. In the later manor houses, the Kitchen Garden or Potager was hidden away, behind the house. This we have placed on a pedestal as the ideal; this we continue to replicate, on millions of tiny properties in cities and suburbs, compounding this environmental scandal with lawn chemicals to maintain non-native grasses in places where grasses don't really want to be.

Enter the new era of consciousness. We are now aware of the ills those lawn chemicals bring, and those of us here on GO are making effort to avoid them. But what of our garden layout? Does it still yearn to be a European castle, with sweeping lawns and barren hedges? Meanwhile, our Kitchen Garden is confined to a cramped tiny swatch hidden behind the house. Yield limitations come with those space limitations, so we are faced with purchasing the bulk of our food, likely imported from miles away.

The local food movement (resources below) reminds us that our food dollars are a "vote" for conventional agriculture - often chemical agriculture. As we on GO well know, when we grow our food at home we can control the chemical content, making it as organic as we are able. Additionally, we can select for heirloom varieties with more flavor and diversity, we can support biodiversity, and we can gain increased nutrition through vine-ripened produce. Yet we are constrained by the limitations of space, by that small vegetable patch in the back yard.

Edible landscaping is our chance to break out of that small patch, to reclaim erstwhile flower beds and lawns, and surround ourselves with bounty, and I dare say, beauty. A garden which yields does not need to look like Old MacGregor's. It's all a matter of selection. Just as we would carefully design any front yard landscape, we can carefully design an attractive, presentable, beautiful garden which gives us produce.

Thus Edible Landscaping = Visual + Yield.

Today, let's discuss the place edibles have in your yard. Are yours confined to the backyard patch? Do you do any "front yard" vegetables? How do you manage to avoid the "Old MacGregor" look, and how do your neighbors react? What are your "next steps" for edibles in your home landscape?

Tomorrow we'll discuss Design.

Resources:

Local food movement:

* Halweil, Brian, Eat Here

* Localvores / Locavores (different spellings) - the Vermont organization has a great explanation on their website

<http://www.vitalcommunities.org/agriculture/localvore/localvorehome.htm>

Edible Landscaping:

* Food Not Lawns campaign in Oregon http://www.foodnotlawns.com/lawns_to_gardens.html

* Path to Freedom urban homestead in Pasadena, CA - my inspiration, that an edible,

intensely productive garden can be breathtakingly beautiful. Check out their photos on their website <http://pathtofreedom.com/journal/>

* Joanne's edible landscaping resource list is online at <http://legacylana.net/EdibleLandscape.htm>

Edible Landscaping, part II: Design

Yesterday we explored why we might reconsider the placement of edible plants in the garden. I proposed that edible plants (including herbs and beneficials) could become "front yard" plants, as part of a landscape which yielded much more than conformist ornament. It all begins with Design.

In any garden, ornamental or edible, design begins with a plan. We consider the site, and outside influences to the site. Do you have a view, that you would like to frame or block? Sharp sun angles, an intense wind? Artistic lines that guide the eye toward an entrance; bulky screens which hide a shed; play areas for children and pets. What garden style do you prefer? Architectural and tidy? Cottage garden? Woodland?

Landscaping is a four-dimensional art form. Gardens are two dimensional on the plane of earth, as we divide path from bed. We have a third dimension, height, where sky is punctuated by shrubs and trees. Additionally, we have the dimension of time or season, which means that our garden will change throughout the year, and will change through the years as the plants grow from youth into maturity.

Master garden design books instruct us to fashion a framework. Large trees and massive shrubs create the backdrop, the massing, the skeleton. Smaller, visually interesting trees and shrubs provide special interest. A plant giving sensational seasonal display might claim this role. Small shrubs fill in at lower levels, with groundcovers taking up the bottom layer.

Switching from ornamental garden design books to Whiti field's forest gardening materials (see resources below) I find the exact same elements, albeit with different names. The edible garden includes the Tree Layer, the Shrub Layer, perhaps a Vine Layer, rounded out with the Vegetable Layer. Discard all notion of edibles confined to rows, herbs confined to dedicated beds. Burst three dimensions into space.

Where the ornamental garden book invites us to think about changing color, distinctive foliage, and deciduous versus evergreen, edibles planning adds to this the season of yield. Woodrow and Hemenway (see resources below) suggest making a chart to schedule yield times (Woodrow works with a year-round Australian growing season). My two peach trees, for instance, are not the same variety. One yields in late June, the other in early August.

Just as a heavy blooming ornamental has a peak and a decline-after-peak, so will our edibles. My kumquat looked gorgeous when it was full of fruit. After harvest, the tree went into a natural dormancy, even though it is evergreen, and it looked far less stunning. The trick is, to anticipate these natural ebb and flows, and to plan for them in creating your design. You don't want an entire swathe of your garden to turn ugly simultaneously.

You'll need to stagger your plantings, interspersing those coming into prime with those leaving that peak. One way of doing this is to use both perennials and annuals. And in order to do that, you'll need to know your plants. Tomorrow we'll cover plant selection.

Today on GO, let's discuss Design and Edible Landscaping: How did you design the overall appearance and yield of your landscape? What tricks can you offer for integrating edibles into a visual landscape? Did you phase-in your edibles, or did you install them all-at-once?

Resources:

General Garden Design:

* Brookes, John, The Book of Garden Design, chapter 4, "Designing with plants"

Edible Garden Design:

* Whiti field, Patrick, How To Make a Forest Garden, "a food-producing garden based on the model of a natural woodland or forest"

* Hemenway, Toby, *Gai a's Garden: A guide to home scale Permacul ture*
* Woodrow, Linda, *The Permacul ture Home Garden*. Includes rotational plans for year round gardens, for fruit trees, for inclusion of chickens in the landscape.
* Jeavons, John, *How to Grow More Vegetables Than You Ever Thought Possible on Less Land Than You Can Imagine*. Includes detailed charts about plant spacing upon a hexagonal grid rather than a row system. This proves very useful when creating masses of vegetable plants in a visual landscape.

Edible Landscaping, part III: Plant selection

In this series on edible landscaping, we have thus far considered redefining the placement of edibles within our garden, and garden design. We've now reached the point of selecting the plants for placement within our dream landscape.

Let's take a moment to consider the notion of "edible." We can stick with the basic dozen or so vegetables which your chain supermarket offers. Most likely, not all of these will grow easily in the micro-climate within your specific garden. The basic fruits offered in your supermarket may come from far-flung places: apples from Washington and New Zealand, grapes from Chile, peppers from Mexico, lettuce from California. Will all of these grow on your property? Probably not.

Thus I invite you to do a little research, learn what is possible for your area. Scan the gardens that surround you - what are your neighbors growing? What is offered in the local nursery? What did indigenous people eat in your portion of the country, before the influences of the global marketplace? Expand your list of plants by expanding your definition of your diet. Elizabeth Schneider and Lee Reich have written excellent books (see resources below) which list numerous unusual food-bearing plants, most likely listing several things which will grow in your locale.

Consider the long-forgotten varieties. Patrick Whiti field (see resources) wrote of perennial vegetables. Ransom and Welsh onion, sea kale and purslane ... I'd never heard of any of them, perhaps because he writes for England and I'm in California, but perhaps because perennial vegetables are just out of vogue at the moment.

Seek out local native plant guides. Visit local museums and rediscover the foods of the past. People have lived on that spot long before you did, and they ate food too, most likely not food imported by Costco and WalMart. What was it, how did they grow it, and can you rejuvenate it?

Also consider care and maintenance. If you select plants which "like you," you make your job as gardener easier. You won't spend hours and days fiddling and worrying, trying to confine the space of one too-large plant, or coddling another through seasons it doesn't naturally wish to weather. Plants which like your yard will be healthier and will attract fewer pests, succumb to fewer diseases. If you pick plants which like you so much that they grace you with their natural bounty, showering you with their offspring, you'll have a sustainable supply. I call them 'Feral Vegetables' - chard is one, in my yard. My sister refers to her 'Sundry Greens.' Sounds kinda gourmet, doesn't it?

Now that you have an expanded list of possible plants, it's time to consider which of these things you think you and your family realistically might eat. No point in growing it if you won't eat it - your garden space is much too valuable! Expand your horizons a bit, but at the same time try to be realistic.

Recall, Edible Landscaping = Visual + Yield. It's now time to consider the visual. What do the plants on your list look like?

Are they deciduous/evergreen? If you need to block an eyesore, a deciduous tree will leave you staring at that eyesore for part of the year. Are your plants annuals, translating into periodic barren spots in your garden? Or are they perennial, making a year-round presence?

Are they tidy or wild in appearance? How does this fit into your preferred aesthetic style? Are they tall or small, bulky or fragile? Where do they fall on Whiti field's list of Tree Layer, Shrub Layer, Vine Layer, Vegetable Layer?

Which ones give a spectacular show to become the centers of your design? (see Edible Landscape part II) In what season do those showy ones give their peak display?

I know my neighbors with their manicured lawns wouldn't enjoy the more "free form" portions of my plant palette if I put them in a front yard spot. Thus I identify those

edibles which are more politically correct in appearance to include in the publicly visible spots.

Tomorrow I'll share some of my specific plants.

Today let's talk about expanding the definition of edible. What plants do you grow and enjoy on your table, which aren't the typical supermarket vegetables? What do they look like, taste like, and how do you prepare them for eating? As you tell about specific plants, please give your USDA zone so that readers may compare experiences.

Resources:

Expanding horizons with uncommon edibles:

- * Schneider, Elizabeth, Vegetables from Amaranth to Zucchini
- * Schneider, Elizabeth, Uncommon Fruits & Vegetables
- * Reich, Lee, Uncommon Fruits Worthy of Attention
- * California Rare Fruit Growers <http://www.crfg.org/pubs/frtfacts.html>
- * Woodrow, Linda, The Permaculture Home Garden, chapter 11 "Fruit trees"
- * Whitefield, Patrick, How To Make a Forest Garden
- * Plants for a Future <http://www.pfaf.org/>
- * Clarke, Charlotte Bringle, Edible and Useful Plants of California (see article in G0 archives about finding your local native plants)

Knowing the visuals of your plants:

- * Rodale's Vegetables
- * Schneider, Elizabeth, Vegetables from Amaranth to Zucchini
- * plant catalogs with good photos, including online catalogs, such as Seeds of Change, Territorial, Abundant Life, Cook's Garden
- * Google images (that's one of the tabs above the search field space in Google). Enter the common name plus variety, or the botanic name, and see what comes up.

Edible Landscaping, part IV: Specific plants

In this series on edible landscaping, we have thus far considered redefining the placement of edibles within our garden, garden design, and what constitutes "edible". You may read earlier portions of this series in G0 archives. Last week we discussed plant selection, and concluded that edibles which are more politically correct in appearance are prime for the publicly visible spots.

In my mild climate, citrus are a glossy leaved evergreen, made all the more decorative when bearing. They're a shoo-in for front yard placement. As an evergreen, they're ideal for blocking a view. (Before you colder-weather folks bemoan my citrus, realize I cannot grow a nut tree, nor set any but the lowest-chill apples.)

A pomegranate is a showpiece nearly year-round. The new growth is a spectacular mahogany leaf. The flowers are an exotically shaped scarlet, and we all know the unique fruit. A California native currant has proved a delicate and pretty small shrub in my yard; I wish I'd known this as I would have placed it in a more central location. But I have since added currant babies in more visual locations than the original parent. In the Tree Layer I yearn to try our California native Elderberry - I have sampled its tart-sweet berries at the local native plant nursery.

At Path to Freedom gardens in Pasadena, CA, they used variegated color varieties of certain plants to add color interest within their landscape. A bronze fennel was a showstopper. Here in my garden, the fennel's wispy green is equally attractive to my neighbor's decorative "papyrus" plant. I recall a leafed plant (possibly a mustard) which was almost black, its foliage was so heavily colored. Their garden art forms include statuesque amaranth and delicate lemon verbena. Vegetable Layer mainstays include bright stemmed chard and medicinal echinacea.

Other highly ornamental vegetables include kales (Lacinato and Pentland Brig are my favorites for appearance); onions/leeks planted en masse, particularly when allowed to bloom; peas or beans on sculptural trellises, especially the colored-flower varieties such as Carouby de Maussane Peas or Painted Lady runner beans; massed plantings of greens such as fri see, chicory, claytonia (miner's lettuce), or Asian mizuna. Edible huazontle, a.k.a. Aztec spinach, equals ornamental coleus in beauty, and will perform in similar filtered light conditions.

John Jeavons (see references below) recommends beneficial insect attractants amid your edibles. Chamomile, yarrow, dill are in the beneficials mix sold by his Bountiful

Gardens. All of these plants are delightful in appearance. Louisa Jones (see references below), photographing French vegetable gardens, points out how flowers are always interspersed into the potagers (French kitchen gardens). In Jones' gorgeous photos you'd swear it was done for appearances sake, but Jeavons gives us functional reason to do so.

Are you a seed saver yet? Don't overlook the delicate dancing beauty of blooming cilantro, arugula, daikon radish. The yellow flowers of the brassica family (collards, gai lan, mustards) are cheery. Brilliant nasturtiums are completely edible. Chicory flowers are a blue to equal a bachelor's button. Salsify flowers are as mysterious a purple as a passionflower.

In my garden, I became heavily interested in California native plants just prior to my interest in edibles. Thus my National Wildlife Federation Certified Backyard Habitat yard includes California poppies, California fuchsia (zauschneria), and Clarkias of several varieties as the color interest. Medicinal evening primrose is a tall showy native flower, and assorted native mints are delicate groundcover. Yarrow (medicinal, Calif native, and beneficial -insect attractant) is a lacy groundcover in many places.

Another favorite groundcover are two varieties of greens from a long-ago package of Cooks garden mesclun, which liked me so much that my property shall never be without them. One is a corn salad/mache and the other is a frisee. When volunteers sprout in my grass pathways, I lift the seedlings to transplant in beds where I need more groundcover. The wonder of these two is that the slugs do not eat them, where those same slugs would devour conventional lettuce. Herbs such as thyme and oregano don't mind the scorching of my dry summer sun, and my sister has discovered the wild rabbits in her area won't touch these strong aromatics. My point being, even pest control can be expanded outward, beyond the fences of the vegetable patch, if you select your plants wisely.

Your plant list for your specific location will be your own unique creation, a product of those edibles which "like you," perennials which thrive locally, your native plants, and your family's tastes.

I began this series by pointing out that edible landscaping is a way to minimize the chemical content in our food, to preserve heirloom varieties and biodiversity, and to gain increased flavor and nutrition. Even as edible landscaping surrounds us in beauty and productivity, it brings us back to a very basic level of contact with our planet. As we tend the soil to grow vegetables which we will eat, we are once again reunited with the seasonal cycles, the cycles of plant-into-compost-into-earth. We are reunited with our dependency upon the bounty of the earth for our physical survival. We reconnect with a cultural knowledge that our ancestors had, and our recent generations have forgotten - a knowledge this planet desperately needs at this time, a knowledge future generations need if humankind is to continue. Through edible landscaping we bring it to life.

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