

Landscape Design with Edibles¹

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A VISUALLY APPEALING EDIBLE landscape is created from the artful combination of edibles and traditional ornamentals in the garden. Although basic design principles apply, the substitution of edible plants for ornamental plants can present some challenges and opportunities. The principal challenge is maintaining a healthy-looking garden year-round with the short life span of most edibles. The key to making gardens last is to mix evergreen ornamentals, flowers, and traditional short-season edibles with long-season edibles and nontraditional edibles, such as berry shrubs, fruiting trees, and ground-covering herbs. The large varieties of new edibles on the market provide opportunities to select edible plants for their aesthetic appeal as well as their taste. New varieties offer compact sizes, dramatic foliage and irregular forms, showy colors with striped variegated leaves, colorful stalks, and unique fruits and vegetables with unusual forms and colors.

When designing the landscape, arrange edibles following the same design principles used to organize annuals and perennials, such as shrubs and groundcovers. Start with a design style or theme to guide the layout, which can be formal with straight edges and geometric shapes, or naturalistic with meandering edges and organic shapes. Use a variety of textures and sizes (including vertical height) for interest, and repeat plants for unity. A color scheme can also be used to unify the landscape by choosing harmonious colors and repeating them throughout the garden. It's important to remember your edible garden is not a production food garden. The goal is not to grow as much produce as possible; rather, the goal is to produce enough edibles of high quality and variety to make the effort worth it.

Although design basics for edible ornamental landscapes are essentially the same as strictly ornamental landscapes, a few details ensure the success of the edible landscape. Gardens with plants that change considerably with the seasons rely more on an organized yet interesting layout, appealing support structures, functional pathways, and

colorful containers and planters to provide interest and beauty when the plants are not taking center stage. There are twelve important ideas to consider when creating a successful edible ornamental garden.

Twelve Ideas to Create an Edible Landscape

1. Combine reliable, low-maintenance ornamentals with edible plants. Use evergreen ornamentals in the same way that they are used in a typical landscape—to maintain enough green structure in the landscape so cool-season bare areas are not noticeable. A colorful mix of landscape plants, trees, flowers, herbs, and vegetables helps maintain the planted appearance all year.
2. Use support structures for aesthetic appeal and proper growing practices. Tomato cages, trellises, arbors, pole supports, teepees, and espaliers are some of the structures that can be used to support plants and provide beauty. Use structures designed to stand on their own as decorative features. Well-built structures with architectural details can provide visual appeal in place of plants in slow seasons. Structures can also provide organization to the garden, keeping plants neat and easy to care for. Use them to create comfort zones with shade and seating and provide opportunities for color and art in the garden. Think of unique ways to repurpose materials and build sustainable structures.
3. Use containers to keep the garden neat and provide interest with color and texture. Planters keep plants within reach, make the soil easier to amend, and provide more protection from slugs, snails, and trampling. Unusual containers and planters can set a style or theme for the garden. A garden dining table with a planter down the center allows diners to clip and eat their own salad at the table. Use containers that drain properly and won't absorb heat unless you want plants to get an early start in cooler weather. A colorful, well-designed compost bin can be centrally located for easy access.

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4. Create hard edges on the beds to keep the garden neat and organized. Garden walls, edging, wattle, borders, curbing, and raised planters can organize the space and help maintain a clean appearance, especially when plants are starting to fade. Edge elements can be made from typical materials such as brick, stone, pavers, and concrete, or from recycled materials such as twigs, wine bottles, street signs, bowling balls, and used timber.
5. Use pathways to link and organize the planted areas and provide easy access to the plants. Pathways act as a wide border to separate beds and create a clean edge. A variety of materials, including brick, pavers, gravel, and mulch create a porous, well-drained surface below the pathway. Landscape fabric under gravel or mulch keeps weeds down and allows water to drain.
6. Create visually pleasing combinations using color, texture, form, and size. Follow standard design principles by using a color theme, mixing coarse, medium, and fine textures for contrast, creating interest with a variety of forms, and selecting plants that fit in the space allowed. Plants that overflow their boundaries become a maintenance problem and create an unkempt appearance.
7. Start small and keep it simple. Begin with one small bed or several containers and play with different plants and combinations. A small area with one structure, such as an arbor, can serve as support for several plants and keep plants corralled in a defined space.
8. Use gardening and growing techniques to create interest in the garden. Cloches, melon nets, shade houses, cold frames, and even hay bales can be used as aesthetic elements that also extend the growing seasons and improve plant health. Top a hay bale with a thin layer of good topsoil and start lettuce, tomato, and pepper seeds in it. The plants draw nutrients from the hay, which also improves the soil beneath it as it breaks down.
9. Select visually appealing, easy-to-grow plants that you most want to eat. Also consider plants that are not readily available at the local farmers market. Think beyond the standard edibles; include fruit trees, lemongrass, berry bushes, and edible flowers that provide color to the garden and your plate. Choose double-duty plants, such as blueberry shrubs for a hedge and strawberries for a great groundcover.
10. Don't get rid of plants too quickly. Let them live out their life cycle, but choose plants with leaves that hold up for the entire growing season. Let plants go to seed, allow some plants such as rainbow chard to grow larger and serve as ornamentals once their edible life span has passed, and allow other plants to grow longer, such as dill and chives for their flowers.
11. Use the principle of right plant, right place when incorporating edibles just as you would any other landscape plant. Determine the growing needs of the plant and match the plant to a suitable site location to meet the growing needs. Many edibles need full sun to produce in a short growing period.
12. Consider the layout and capacity of your existing irrigation system. Think about where water is delivered and locate plants accordingly. As with all plants, edibles need water to become established and have an establishment period two to three times a year. This may mean that the ornamental plants in the beds get more water during the establishment period. An aboveground system such as drip or microirrigation is usually more flexible and can be adjusted to target different plants during establishment and throughout the growing seasons.

Unusual and Aesthetic Edibles

Some edibles are beautiful plants that have the aesthetic qualities of many perennial ornamentals. Select edibles for their visual characteristics in the front yard (Table 1). Use plants that would be considered aesthetically pleasing and neat in growth habit. Characteristics that most people find pleasing include large leaves; large, colorful flowers; and well-defined, compact form. Edibles best used in the backyard include carrots, onions, melons, squash, cucumbers, and tomatoes. These plants tend to have more sprawling, loose forms or fine textures. The vines of squash and melons, however, can be tamed with nice climbing structures. Many tropical edibles are more useful for spices and flavorings and may require special harvesting and care.

Tips for Success

Your edible landscape will be more successful if you follow some practical maintenance and health tips for both you and the plants. If you are mixing ornamentals and edibles, consider the pesticides and herbicides you are using. If you want to avoid chemicals on your food, you may have to carefully separate the treatment of the ornamental and edible plant material, use no pesticides, or select safer pesticides to use on all plant material. Take the time to learn more about the effects of pesticides, herbicides, and

fertilizer on edible plants and health issues for humans. Remember to wash edibles thoroughly before eating. Edibles in your front yard may not be protected by a fence, leaving them accessible to neighborhood dogs, cats, and kids. You may want to avoid locating edible plants along the sidewalk where dog walkers (and stray dogs) are more likely to travel.

If you live in a regulated neighborhood, check with your homeowners' association before you plan to use edibles in the front yard. Some associations have rules prohibiting the use of edibles in the front yard, regardless of how they are planted. Many edibles, however, can be planted as ornamentals that just happen to have the side benefit of having edible parts. Fruit trees and berry shrubs are good examples.

If you want a Florida-Friendly yard that includes edibles, keep in mind that locating edibles throughout the plant beds may not be the best water conservation strategy. Edibles often need more water than many ornamentals, so try to group the plants, both ornamental and edibles, by water needs. Use the concept of hydro-zoning, but avoid having too many seasonal edibles in the same location to prevent large bare spots at certain times of the year.

TABLE 1. Visually appealing plants for the front yard and tropical edibles

| Front yard edibles (North/Central Florida) | Tropical edibles (Central/South Florida) |
|--|--|
| Artichoke (<i>Cynara scolymus</i>) | Coffee (<i>Coffea arabica</i>) |
| Corn (<i>Zea mays</i>) | Fig (<i>Ficus carica</i>) |
| Kale (<i>Brassica oleracea</i>) | 'Meyer' lemon (<i>Citrus limon</i>) |
| Lettuce (<i>Lactuca sativa</i>) | Naranjilla (<i>Solanum quitoense</i>) |
| Pepper (<i>Capsicum annuum</i>) | Orangeberry (<i>Glycosmis pentaphylla</i>) |
| Sweet bay (<i>Laurus nobilis</i>) | Tree tomato (<i>Cyphomandra crassicaulis</i>) |
| Chard (<i>Beta vulgaris</i>) | Yerba mate (<i>Ilex paraguariensis</i>) |
| Basil (<i>Ocimum</i> spp.) | Australian finger lime (<i>Citrus australasica</i>) |
| Sage (<i>Salvia officinalis</i>) | Cinnamon (<i>Cinnamomum zeylanicum</i>) |
| Eggplant (<i>Solanum melongena</i>) | Rose apple (<i>Syzygium jambos</i>) |
| Blueberry (<i>Vaccinium</i> spp.) | Sugarcane (<i>Saccharum officinarum</i>) |
| Lemongrass (<i>Cymbopogon citratus</i>) | Sunquat (<i>Citrofortunella 'Sunquat'</i>) |
| Paddle cactus (<i>Opuntia ficus-indica</i>) | Banana (<i>Musa</i> spp.) |
| Passionflower (<i>Passiflora</i> spp.) | Avocado (<i>Persea americana</i>) |
| Rosemary (<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>) | Calamondin orange (<i>Citrofortunella mitis</i>) |
| Beans (<i>Phaseolus</i> , <i>Vicia</i> , and <i>Vigna</i> spp.) | Citrumelo (<i>Citrus x paradisi x Poncirus trifoliata</i>) |
| Pineapple guava (<i>Feijoa sellowana</i>) | Kumquat (<i>Fortunella</i> spp.) |
| Roselle (<i>Hibiscus sabdariffa</i>) | Malabar spinach (<i>Basella alba</i>) |

Several good resources are available for planting and growing edibles throughout your yard. See Additional Resources below, research the plants, and look for inspiration in books, catalogs, and your favorite garden store.

Additional Resources

Easton, V. 2009. *The NEW Low-Maintenance Garden*.

Portland, OR: Timber Press.

Martin, L. G., and B. E. Martin. 2010. *Growing Tasty Tropical Plants in Any Home, Anywhere*. North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing.

Soler, I. 2011. *The Edible Front Yard, the Mow-Less, Grow-More Plan for a Beautiful, Bountiful Garden*. Portland, OR: Timber Press.