

Designing an Edible Landscape or Eat Your Yard

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Designing your landscape with edibles is as simple as replacing ornamental plants with ones that can be consumed (Worden, 2004). Consumers are looking for simple ways to improve their lifestyle by living healthier and protecting the environment. They are eating more fruits and vegetables, wanting to grow naturally or organically and use less pesticides or chemicals. The solution is to design fruits, vegetables and herbs right into their landscape. An educational program was developed to assist homeowners with design, plant selection, and maintenance. Several workshops were delivered throughout the county at many different locations over a 2-year period. Homeowners were surveyed to determine if they incorporated edibles into their landscape or started a garden. The survey also asked if they implemented one of the Best Management Practices suggested at the workshop.

Introduction

Master Gardeners and Extension agents started hearing from the community as soon as the recession was realized: they wanted to know how to grow their own food. Hunger for programs on edible landscaping, requests for information on vegetable gardening and growing tropical fruit were in demand. The hard economic times we face today are similar to other times in our history when our nation faced the rationing of fuel, food, and dry goods. Today many homeowners are facing foreclosures, job loss, rising insurance rates, increasing fuel costs, reductions in salaries and benefits. As in times past there is a history of individuals and communities turning to gardening during times of social and economic change.

In the 1890s, people trying to create social reform promoted the utilization of vacant city lots to provide land and technical assistance to the unemployed (Lawson, 2005). About the same time, educational reforms were integrating school gardens into lessons, which grew into a national movement. During WWI and WWII the government encouraged citizens to grow their own food so that more could be sent overseas. These plantings were called “Victory Gardens,” “War Gardens,” or “Food Gardens for Defense.” The Great Depression saw families applying for subsistence garden plots and employment in cooperative gardens and farms (Lawson, 2005).

In 1943, Eleanor Roosevelt dug up a portion of the beautifully manicured White House lawn to plant her own Victory Garden. In 2009 Michelle Obama has again replaced a portion of the White House lawn with a garden that she, her family, and guests can enjoy. The popularity of growing food is here and now, but history shows that after an economy stabilizes, this trend all but disappears. By designing edibles into the landscape or slowly replacing ornamental trees, shrubs, and vines with those that can be consumed, one may be able to provide a longer lasting satisfaction with gardening and incorporate a healthier lifestyle.

Materials and Methods

Extension responded to this need by working with an advisory committee to develop Edible Landscaping workshops in 2009. Workshops were designed to enable homeowners to plan an edible landscape. Several different stations were integrated to match the needs of each participant. Stations included how to design your landscape with edibles, how to choose the right tropical fruit for your site, how to make your garden organic, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), which flowers can I eat, how to make and use compost, watering systems, vermiculture, home-grown herbs, and growing veggies in unusual containers. All of the stations were interactive and involved guests with the presentation and offered samples to taste (Fig. 1). This workshop was presented



Fig. 1. Edible Landscaping workshop.

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Table 1. Surveying the programs.

Event/program	Events/programs (no.)	Participants (no.)	People surveyed (no.)	Participants that increased their knowledge of two BMPs (%)	Participants that adopted at least one practice change (%)
Edible Landscape	12	1,135	348	100% (264/264)	90% (238/264)
Incredible Edible Workshop	1	60	21	100% (21/21)	80% (17/21)

on the Extension grounds, at local churches, many public events, and the Fort Pierce Downtown Farmers Market.

Incredible Edibles, another workshop, was suggested by advisory committee members to provide a more in-depth program to assist homeowners with growing their own food, reducing their food budgets, and eating healthier. This program was delivered in five sessions addressing different techniques to growing food: 1) herbs, vegetables and fruits focused on the Florida Friendly Landscape™ principles as they applied to edible plants, discussed individual vegetables and herbs; 2) veggies in unusual places demonstrated that edibles could be grown in just about any container, participants also created their own self-watering container; 3) peachy keen fruits discussed subtropical and tropical fruits that would grow in zone 9b, how to select, plant, and manage; 4) scouting your garden incorporated IPM techniques, identifying possible garden pests, and how to control them; 5) harvesting and eating the fruits of your labor demonstrated harvesting techniques, different types of storage, and how to preserve your garden. Each session had examples to taste along with recipes with nutritional information.

Results and Discussion

Since edible landscape programming began in the fall of 2009, over 1,000 residents have participated in workshops. 1,135 participants increased their knowledge through the various educational stations, 90% (1,022/1,135) of the participants adopted the inclusion of edible plants into their landscape (Table 1). Over 86% determined the station “design your landscape with edibles” was the most helpful. One hundred percent (60/60) of

the participants of the Incredible Edibles workshop increased their knowledge of proper planting times and identification of pests, two of the best management practices (BMP) presented. Participants also learned how to make an inexpensive grow box, saving them \$60.00 per container.

This program has re-stimulated the idea of community gardens. Dr. Marilyn Swisher provided the groundwork for individuals and community groups to begin the process associated with developing a community garden. Two community gardens, one at a botanical garden and another at a church, continue to be successful. Local school gardens, with the assistance of Master Gardeners and Extension agents, bring learning outside and incorporate the garden into the students’ lessons. Teachers have noticed the change in some students and their abilities to stay focused on their lessons after being in the garden. Growing their own food and daring to taste has encouraged healthier eating habits; students are now choosing vegetables in the cafeteria and at home.

Adding edible plants into the landscape may be a technique that will encourage community members to start to adopt a healthier lifestyle. Demonstrating methods to bring fresh fruits and vegetables to their table from a garden in the backyard or a container on a patio, to working within a neighborhood to produce food for substance and the soul may promote a sustainable and healthy community.

Literature Cited

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