

EATING OUT OF YOUR GARDEN



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We love our gardens but they can be hard work! Sometimes a vegetable garden is either too much effort or there is very little space available. Changing the idea we have that ornamental plants should be sited separately to edible ones, frees you to include productive plants anywhere that the conditions are right in your garden. This belief in 'appropriateness' in planting is comparatively recent; once upon a time 'cottage gardens' simply grew whatever was useful or beautiful together in one area.

There are many advantages to freeing yourself from restrictive gardening beliefs, your garden rewards you now with colour and fragrance but it could also be providing nutritious, tasty additions to your diet. A salad bowl full of a wide mixture of edible greens and flowers will contain an enormous range of vitamins and minerals compared to a salad bowl just full of store-bought lettuce.

Even more importantly, your edible landscape connects you and your children to your food source. It introduces children to the joys of foraging for fruit and an appreciation of a wide range of flavours. An edible garden is more ecologically sound and economically viable. Having an edible landscape means you are shifting the focus in your garden, from the plants to you, the gardener.

So in return for all your hard work, why not let your garden provide you with not only beauty but healthy, flavoursome fruit and vegetables?

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ADVANTAGES

- Edible landscaping maximises the use of space by allowing production from areas that were previously purely ornamental.
- There are many health benefits attached to growing some of your own food, the food is fresher with a higher vitamin content, and free from chemical residues.
- The environment benefits as you are reducing the energy cost of food transportation.
- You get more for your effort; edibles use the same watering, fertilising and weeding as many ornamentals.
- Many edible plants are very decorative.
- Best of all are the huge taste benefits with better flavours and the opportunity to try unusual varieties without paying gourmet prices. There are 10,000 edible plants in the world; the diet of most Australians consists of only 20 basic foods.

LOW MAINTENANCE

Aim to reduce your garden maintenance using the following strategies:

- Reduce pest problems by good plant selection.
- Reduce weeds with lots of mulching.
- Choose the best soil, aspect and access for the edible plants.
- Plant the areas of poorer soil with low maintenance native plants that will enhance the habitat for small birds and other predators of insect pests eg *Grevillea*, *Hakea*, *Banksia*, *Leptospermum* (Tea Tree).
- Pay attention to garden edges where running grasses can invade, plant barriers of comfrey or use a path as a barrier.
- Set up an irrigation system, use timers to prevent water wastage.
- Permanent paths should be planned wherever possible, as they are generally weed-free and improve access.
- Reduce lawn areas by assessing how useful the lawn actually is, replace with hardy native groundcovers, to save on water, maintenance and fertiliser. The time you save mowing the lawn can be spent harvesting instead!

Reduce theft

Sadly, many people find that attractive looking fruit in the front yard tends to disappear due to two-legged pests. Don't plant the front garden with plants you value highly; try planting unrecognisable vegetables and fruits such as Japanese Raisin tree, Ceylon Spinach, Malabar Chestnut and there will be less problems with them 'walking'.

SUITABLE PLANT CHOICES

PERENNIAL VEGETABLES

Some of the more ornamental vegetables are listed below. Planting them in flowerbeds or shrub borders will save space in the vegetable garden. Perennials are particularly useful:

- **Chilli** *Capsicum spp*

Chillies are often sold as a decorative plant in pots; try a chilli variety like 'Fiesta', which carries a range of colours.

- **Elephant Garlic** *Allium ampeloprasum*

This mild garlic has a large purple pom-pom flower and is a good choice for the back of a flower garden. Planted amongst roses it will help to repel pests.

- **Florence Fennel** *Foeniculum vulgare*

Fennel will form a clump of feathery foliage; there is a particularly attractive bronze form. The swollen stems add a sweet crunch to salads, the leaves and seeds can be used to season baked fish and the flowers are very attractive to beneficial insects.

- **Hibiscus Spinach/Aibika** *Abelmoschus manihot*

A plant for warmer areas, with its large yellow hibiscus-like flower, this shrub can easily be mistaken for an ornamental.

- **Jerusalem Artichoke** *Helianthus tuberosus*

A tall, back of the flower garden plant, the attractive yellow daisies can be used as a cut flower. It produces large numbers of edible tubers that can be boiled or baked, when very fresh they can be grated raw in salads.

- **Rosella** *Hibiscus sabdariffa*

A hardy annual shrub for warmer areas, suited to a wide range of soil conditions, the bright red fruit looks very attractive, can be used for herb tea, homemade cordial or jam.

The following members of the ginger family all appreciate moist fertile soil and will tolerate some shade. They can be used as foliage plants to give a tropical feel and blend well with bananas and pawpaws. They have the added advantage of tolerating 'bandicooting' so you can dig around the edge of the clump and pull away what you need, without having to dig the whole clump up at once. Division is recommended though, at least every 2nd year. Even though they are subtropical plants they can often be grown in warm sheltered spots in cooler areas of Australia.

- **Turmeric** *Curcuma domestica*

A broad-leafed tropical plant with a delightful white flower spike. The rhizome (swollen root) makes up 25% of curry powder. Leaves wrapped around fish

flavour it during cooking. In Indonesia, the young shoots and rhizome tips are eaten raw.

- **Ginger** *Zingiber officinale*

Very young rhizomes, known as stem ginger, are peeled and eaten raw in salads, pickled or cooked in syrup. Young, slightly spicy shoots can be used as a vegetable.

- **Galangal/Thai Ginger** *Alpinia galanga*

This forms a tall clump of broad-leafed foliage; it looks right at home in a tropical garden. The rhizomes have a spicy aroma and a pungent taste somewhere between pepper and ginger; it is often cooked with lemon grass.

VINES

Vines are an easy plant to incorporate into the landscape and can also provide privacy or shade:

- **Grapes** are useful wherever summer shade and winter sun are needed. Vines can live to a great age so need a strong trellis or pergola to grow on. In warmer areas excellent air circulation will help to reduce mildew problems. The best varieties for more humid areas include Isabella, Red Flame and Carolina Black Rose.
- **Kiwifruit** are deciduous vines and need both a male and female plant. Keep in mind that a lot of pruning is required so access is important. Unpruned kiwis are a bit like having a Triffid in the garden! Kiwis require a cooler, wind sheltered, and east-facing site. The northern limit for commercial kiwi growing is our local town of Maleny but in the right position it is possible they can be grown further north.
- **Passionfruit** are evergreen and come in a range of varieties, vines can be short-lived due to the woody passionfruit virus affecting the vines so start a new one every few years.
- **Choko** is probably the most under-valued vegetable in Australia. It can be used to quickly give shade over a pergola or to cover a fence. Eaten small egg sized, the taste is far superior to zucchini.
- **Luffa**, or Vegetable Sponge is an annual vine and is easy to grow.

FRUIT TREES AND SHRUBS

There are many fruit trees and shrubs that are highly ornamental and that can be planted anywhere in the garden. For ease of management select plants that are fruit fly-resistant and hardy:

- **Bay Laurel** *Laurus nobilis*

The bay leaf familiar to cooks is an easy to grow, drought-tolerant tree that lives a long time, becoming a large gnarled tree with age. It can be used as a topiary specimen in a large tub with regular pruning.

- **Blueberry** *Vaccinium spp*

Small shrubs with attractive small bell-like flowers, suitable for any position that will grow camellias or rhododendrons well. For warmer areas tetraploid types such as 'Gulf Coast' are a good choice.

- **Citrus** *Citrus spp*

Every garden should have at least one citrus tree, for the fragrance of the blossoms alone. In warmer areas Tahitian limes are a better choice than lemons if there is only room for one tree. They crop over a longer period, are less thorny, and are smaller trees than lemons and the fruit can be used in a similar way. Of the lemons 'Eureka' is a good choice, less prone to fruit fly damage than 'Meyer' or 'Lemonade'. Citrus can look good in large tubs, suitable varieties are cumquats, a lemon such as 'Patio Meyer'

- **Japanese Raisin Tree** *Hovenia dulcis*

Native to China and Japan, this small deciduous hardy tree, reaches a height of 6-9m. It will grow in a wide climate range and is very hardy to cold. It produces copious quantities of sweet, raisin-like, edible fruit. It is useful as a small shade tree and is unaffected by fruit fly.

- **Mulberry** *Morus spp*

'Shatoot' is a particularly good mulberry for small gardens as the fruit are cream coloured and won't stain clothes. If you prefer a black mulberry take a cutting from one with a good flavour while it is dormant. Mulberries have the advantage of fruiting on the current season's wood so you can prune them hard and still have a crop that year. If they are closely planted and coppiced, a fruiting hedge is created.

- **Coffee** *Coffea arabica*

Coffee is an attractive shrub with glossy leaves and fragrant white flowers. Unfortunately this is only for the very keen as it takes a lot of work to achieve a cup of coffee by processing your own beans.

- **Grumichama** *Eugenia brasiliensis*

Suitable for warmer areas, this very attractive tree with shiny leaves starry white flowers produces fruit similar to a cherry. Unfortunately the birds are keen on them as well so protection is needed.

- **Jaboticaba** *Myrciaria cauliflora*

An excellent tree for warmer areas. The fruit is similar to a large black grape and as the fruit is hidden on the internal branches there are usually no bird problems. It is also resistant to fruit fly.

- **Natal Plum** *Carissa grandiflora*

This thorny shrub has white, highly fragrant flowers and an edible plum-like fruit. It can be used to create a thorny barrier against intruders.

- **Pecan** *Carya illinoensis*

If you have a very large garden and would like a spreading shade tree with a bonus of nuts, then a pecan is a good choice. Many varieties need 2 to pollinate well, so choose your variety carefully. 'Success' has the reputation of being self-fertile, so only one is needed. Pecans will grow over a wide climate range but need a deep fertile soil and plenty of water. For hotter, drier areas a carob is a possible alternative.

- **Malabar Chestnut** *Pachira aquatica*

This unusual ornamental, evergreen tree grows to a height of 7m. It has beautiful large cream tassel-like flowers that are very striking. It prefers moist, well-composted soils in a warm, sunny position. It is resistant to drought but frost tender. The nuts inside the green, football-shaped pods are edible and nutritious, they can be roasted, fried in oil, added to stir-fry or eaten raw.

- **Strawberry Guava** *Psidium cattleianum*

A compact, evergreen bushy shrub to 3 - 6m in height. Its leaves are smooth and glossy, the white flowers bloom in late spring, but sometimes the tree blooms a second time in late autumn. The fruit is wine-red, with a very thin skin and believed

to have the finest flavour of any guava. Strawberry guavas will grow in a wide range of soils. Heavy frost will damage the plants. It is useful as a fruiting hedge and windbreak.

Herbs have a wide range of uses, are generally hardy to pests and diseases and need little watering. They are ideal edible landscaping plants as they are often beautiful as well as being useful.

EDIBLE FLOWERS

These can be used to brighten meals:

- **Borage**

The flowers and leaves are used in salads and to decorate fruit punch.

- **Daylilies**

First introduced to Australia as a vegetable by the Chinese during the gold rushes. All parts of the plant are edible but the flowers are mainly eaten. Choose plainer, old-fashioned varieties in orange/yellow colours. The brighter red fancy ones could possibly cause allergic reactions in some people.

- **Marigold**

Marigolds have many uses in the organic garden. The petals can be used to decorate salads. The whole plant at the end of the growing season, can be chopped up and dug through the soil to control nematodes.

- **Nasturtiums**

The seedpods can be pickled as caper substitutes, the leaves and flowers are high in vitamin C and can be added to salads.

- **Squash blossoms**

The male flowers of zucchinis can be harvested, deep fried in tempura batter or chopped and used in stir-fry or omelette, they are delicious.

- **Violet flowers**

Besides their endearing fragrance, violet flowers can be candied to decorate cakes; the violet leaves are high in vitamin A and can be used in salads.

WATERPLANTS

Water plants are easy to grow, ornamental and can provide gourmet food.

- **Arrowhead** *Sagittaria sagittifolia*

An attractive aquatic edge plant with arrow shaped leaves and edible corms. It is very hardy, grows to 30 cm high and likes full sun. The tuber flesh is cream coloured and it is eaten boiled, baked or fried, it should not be eaten raw. The young shoots can also be eaten.

- **Chinese Waterchestnut** *Eleocharis dulcis*

This is easily one of our favourite vegetables. Waterchestnuts are a rush-like plant to 1m tall. The delicious crispy tuber is nutritious and contains B vitamins; it can be eaten raw or cooked. They are a common ingredient in Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian dishes.

- **Lotus** *Nelumbo nucifera*

Lotus has a beautiful flower but it needs a very large pond and can be invasive. Be wary of planting it into a dam unless you are happy to see the dam completely covered in lotus. The tuber is used in stir-fry.

Don't forget to visit our website for lots of information and resources to help you get the most out of your garden!

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