

Landscaping Good Enough to Eat by Marlys Bell

Inspired by Barbara Kingsolver's book, "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life" I embarked upon an experiment to test the feasibility of feeding the family from our garden year-round. As a result, two gardens were designed for growing food. One area is a traditional raised bed garden for annual fruits and vegetables and the other is for longer-lasting fruit-bearing trees, shrubs and perennial plants that produce some of our favorite foods. Although both are attractive, the perennial edible garden qualifies as landscaping, while also yielding food.

The general purpose of landscaping is to add function, beauty and value to the home and its surroundings. As a result, attention is paid to artistic concepts such as: order (balance, line and proportion) scale, rhythm, harmony, repetition, contrast, function and form. If these concepts are considered in designing a food-producing garden, it can also be aesthetically pleasing.



Artichoke Plant
(photo: hydra.usc.edu)



Blueberries
(Photo: trees-online.co.uk)

Our perennial edible garden follows the terrain, meandering down a gentle slope through sun and partial shade. It is dotted with fruit trees, accented with giant artichoke and cardoon, contrasted with delicate blueberry shrubs and large rhubarb leaves, and then finally edged with strawberries. It is pleasing to the eye as well as to the stomach.

In a previously unused area about seven feet wide and 200 feet long, we have eight fruit trees. In addition to two different kinds of cherries (needed for pollination) and a prune tree, we have five dwarf grafted fruit trees. From those trees, we have five kinds of apples, three varieties of peaches, two different pluots, as well as apricot, plum and nectarine. We expect many varieties of various fruits from early summer to late fall. In larger sunny spaces, olives could also be considered.

Along the fence in partially shady spots are various kinds of blackberries and raspberries. The sunniest areas are reserved for hardy kiwis that are the size of grapes without the usual fuzz of the larger tender kiwis. Grapes or, in inconspicuous places, quince, currants and gooseberries, are other options for fences.

Since blueberry shrubs are happiest in rich acidic soil, they are planted amongst pine needles under the shade of the towering pine tree while the large artichokes are planted in full sun but sheltered from winter winds by existing native shrubs on the other

side of the fence. The eight-foot tall, silver cardoon, now 3 years old, is hardier and serves as a sculptural focal point for the garden. Repetition is achieved by periodic placement of rhubarb throughout the garden. It's huge, dark green leaves contrast with the fern-like foliage of the asparagus, tansy and yarrow.



Borage Flowers
(photo: J. Segerstrom)

Strawberries, nasturtiums, violets and thyme are great groundcovers or “front of the border” plants. Borage, comfrey and oregano add color, texture and fill in the gaps and knit with garden together. Other herbs are grown to provide seasonings (rosemary, mint, dill, fennel, oregano, marjoram, garlic chives,) and tea (chamomile, lavender, mint). In the perennial edible garden I also grow spinach, kale and Swiss chard because they survive several seasons if they get some shade from the summer afternoon sun.

To control aphids and other “bad bugs, in the garden, I attract good bugs by planting alyssum, asters, marigolds, zinnia and other year-round or reseeding flowers like hollyhocks, cerinthe and calendula. To deter the gophers from the fruit trees, they are circled with daffodils and lavender that so far have discouraged the gophers and other pests.

For more color and visual interest in the garden, several wine barrels are elevated on stumps and filled with self-seeding cosmos, zinnias, cleome, poppies, and marigolds or hardy perennials like yarrow, aster, and sunflowers. They also attract good bugs to help control aphids and other pests.

In addition to providing food, edible landscaping—once established—takes less water than the annual vegetable garden and other traditional landscaping that utilizes large amounts of turf. It also takes less time to maintain with the primary tasks being pruning and harvesting. About the only disadvantage is waiting 2-4 years for some of the fruit trees, blueberries and asparagus. But the herbs and strawberries produce the first season and the raspberries, blackberries and rhubarb can be picked the 2nd year making trips to the edible garden full of many tasty snacks and surprises.

Marlys Bell is demonstrating sustainable living practices that include year-round edible food production.