

## Rosalind Creasy's Edible Landscaping Basics



Creasy Driveway Garden surrounded by boxwood includes peanuts, blueberries, peppers, and 'Pink Pearl' apple

Edible landscaping integrates food plants in an ornamental setting utilizing the same design principles as traditional landscaping. Ornamental edible plants—annuals and perennials as well as trees and shrubs—replace some of the typical non-productive plant material. Theoretically any edible plant can be used in an ornamental landscape; but practically and aesthetically, some are better suited than others.

Edible landscaping mixes beauty and utility, yet not all plants in the yard need be edible. In fact, that would produce too much food for most families, not to mention the time and work that would be involved. Careful planning and the judicious use of edibles results in a yard that is flavorful, practical, visually pleasing.

### Benefits

Homeowners in all climates—with yards large or small—benefit from a trellis of cherry tomatoes cascading over the entryway, a fragrant border of flavored basil, and a prolific dwarf apple tree or two. You can find tasty and ornamental edible plants for just about any garden setting. Only the most shady areas and soggy soils are not suitable. Reserve the sunniest spots and the areas with the best soil for fruit trees and annual vegetables. Some culinary herbs thrive in rocky or poor soils and a few perennial edibles do well in wet locations.

### Design



The strong hardscape elements—stone pillars, beds, paths, and stairs—define the edible landscape in any season.

The main criteria for an edible landscape are a diversity of food on your table not just the look of your yard. This results in a greater mixture of textures, forms, and colors than in a

typical ornamental landscape. To counterbalance this combination of plants, the most important design elements are strong, firm lines and structure.

The seasonal nature of the landscape—the color of bloom and fruiting as well as the occasional periods of reduced drama due to transplanting, periods of harvesting, and soil cultivation—require definition by pathways, patios, planters, hedges, evergreens, and structures. Long curving beds or interplantings of colorful flowering plants, whether edible or not, help tie together the design and provide intriguing accents. Without the backbone of an integrated design, an edible landscape can turn into just another scraggly vegetable patch.

Edible plants lend themselves to creative designs—with other edibles or ornamentals. For example, interplant a cool-season border of lettuces and spinach with dwarf nasturtiums. Peppers of all kinds make a striking scene when combined with dwarf marigolds or a background of tall red salvias. For a shady area, plant a currant hedge bordered with Alpine strawberries and curly parsley. Grow dwarf fruit trees in geometric beds surrounded with a border of culinary herbs, or plant them along the driveway instead of the typical privets or junipers.

### **Practical Reality**



**A sunny space is ideal for most edibles. The wall supports a ‘Black Satin’ thornless blackberry intertwining with roses. The mirror adds interest and expands the view.**

Good design is important, but if the plants are not healthy, even the best design is for naught. The keys to healthy plants are choosing the correct plant for the right place and well-prepared soil. For peak production, most edibles require at least six hours of midday sun and in general, well-drained soil. Amend the soil for annual fruits and vegetables with plenty of organic matter.

Perennial plants will take from three to five years to start to look mature. On the other hand annual beds filled with herbs, vegetables, and flowers can give you a colorful and tasty impact the first summer.

### **Start Small**



**Containers will fit into any space. An antique strawberry jar lends a formal feel, while keeping berries clean and off the ground.**

With any edible landscape, start small. That means starting with an area you can easily maintain. Temper your spring enthusiasm with the knowledge that in addition to the time and energy for maintenance that ornamentals require, edibles also require harvesting, cooking, and—if it's a large harvest—preserving. Choose dwarf fruit trees over standard-size trees and select fruit varieties that spread the harvest over many months.

### **Bon Appetit**

An edible landscape is one of the most rewarding yards you can have. You'll be able to grow tasty treats that can't be bought for love or money, enough often to share with friends and neighbors. An edible landscape is the only form of gardening that truly nurtures all the senses.



**Rosalind Creasy surrounded by her bounty—tomatoes, peppers, and squash—and flanked by kumquats in pots.**

© 2010 Rosalind Creasy