

INCREDIBLE, EDIBLE LANDSCAPES

Written by Path to Freedom

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by Joseph M Keyser

Picture this. It is early morning and you have just picked up the newspaper from the curb and are walking back to the house. On your way, you bend over and pluck a tasty handful of strawberries for your cereal. You decide to walk around the side of the house to your back door, stopping for a minute to fill your other hand with plump, juicy blueberries. Now you're thinking fresh, hot blueberry muffins!

If this scene appeals to you, you are ready for an edible landscape. Most homeowners associate growing fruits and vegetables with large, sunny backyards, filled with trellises and rototilled garden beds. Nothing could be further from the truth. Edible landscaping means taking advantage of whatever space may be conveniently available. Happily, it also promises exciting new choices: a broader, more colorful and tastier palette of plants than you might realize.

To start, think about that strawberry-lined border. Instead of planting marigolds and begonias along sunny pathways or in front of shrubs, turn to some of the varieties of alpine strawberry: they form runnerless clumps, flower and fruit all year long, while providing white or pink blossoms. Or you might prefer using a stately border of chives, either white-flowering garlic chives or the more common purple-flowering variety; both are great in soups, salads, herbal breads or just atop a baked potato. For a fuller herbal border, add some parsley, oregano and creeping thyme. The latter two also make excellent – and tasty – ground covers. Shrubs are another avenue to Epicurean delight. Azaleas are nice enough for a couple of weeks each spring, but what about highbush blueberries? A single mature bush planted as a specimen can provide up to 20 pounds of fruit or more, with lovely scarlet foliage throughout the fall. And just think about a blueberry hedge!

Other hedges can be grown with gooseberries, currants, or pest- and disease-resistant Rugosa roses. These shrub roses offer fragrant, red, pink, yellow and white blooms, as well as large scarlet rose hips, which can ornament the shrub well into winter. The rose hips are loaded with 60 times more vitamin C than oranges, and can be made into teas or jams, or eaten raw. Note that this species can be somewhat invasive and should not be planted in agricultural or meadow areas.

Using fruit trees to ornament your landscape does not mean creating an orchard, and many varieties require very little care. Certainly, there are the usual suspects: disease-resistant hybrids of apple, peach, pear, plum and cherry, most of which are available in dwarf or semi-dwarf sizes for easy care and picking. But if you are adventurous, you might want to try a more exotic specimens, like our native Pawpaw, the "banana of the north." Perhaps you've heard the poems and songs about this under-appreciated tree, or even seen them growing as an understory tree along the Potomac. But plant one in your yard, and you'll soon have a dense pyramidal accent tree that will be the talk of the neighborhood, especially as the custard-like fruits mature in mid- to late summer.

Other interesting choices might include the American persimmon, with its twin autumnal gifts of spectacular foliage and sweet golden-yellow and orange fruits. Or perhaps think about the Juneberry (Amelanchier or Serviceberry), which is now gaining popularity for use in native plantings. While shopping for your Juneberry, you will discover that there are several Amelanchier species known by several common names: some species resemble trees in form, others tall, showy shrubs; all feature sweet blueberry-sized fruits, were favorites of the Indians and are equally loved by birds and other wildlife. Of course, there is more to edible landscaping than the odd fruit tree or trellis covered with grapes or hardy kiwi fruit. Edible plants can be tucked in anywhere ornamental plants might have been used, and can prove equally attractive. Several years ago, Brookside Gardens in Wheaton created a brilliant composition in red in a walled border garden. Along with typical ornamental species, Brookside's horticulturists demonstrated the value of edible plantings by incorporating the exciting reds of rhubarb and Swiss chard, along with tomatoes grown as decorative vines.

In your own perennial border, you might consider planting asparagus to provide a soft, graceful backdrop behind your taller plants. If you have places for plants, you have spaces for edibles.

And even if you're not quite up to planting an edible landscape, you probably can start enjoying nature's bounty today. Take a look at your lawn and garden beds; there are probably plenty of edible plants available — provided you do not use pesticides. Younger dandelion leaves make a wonderful addition to salads as do the newer leaves on plantains. The young shoots of ajuga (Bugle), often used as a shade-loving groundcover, also can be tossed in, along with young leaves from yarrow, and the flowers and buds of nasturtiums, daylilies and Johnny jump-ups. All you really need is a tangy raspberry vinaigrette. Bon appetit!

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