



eat.

your landscaping



by Kerrie Badertscher

Ever hear of victory gardens, potager (kitchen), or herb gardens? Victory gardens are vegetable, fruit, and herb gardens that historically were planted at private residences in the United States during wartime to reduce the pressure on the public food supply brought on by the war effort. Today, planting a victory garden, not only saves your family money, but it can be a fun way to reconnect to the production of your food. Instead of traveling many miles from farm to table, your food would travel from your own garden to your table. Growing vegetables, herbs, and fruits can quickly become a family hobby and a great teaching tool for children. Research shows that gardening reduces stress, can increase physical and nutritional health, and often offers a sense of satisfaction. If you do not have land available, community garden plots can be found in most municipalities and can provide the same benefits.

Especially in Colorado where water is a concern, gardening should be water-wise. The Seven Principles of Xeriscape™ hold just as true for edible landscaping as any other type of landscape. These include: plan and design for water conservation, aesthetics appealing and utility; improve the soil; limit turf to practical uses or use turf alternatives; irrigate efficiently; select appropriate plants and group them according to water needs; mulch and maintain. Improving the soil with compost from the garden completes the cycle of plant life.

Look at transitioning your landscape into several zones of water needs. Think of zone 1, often the closest to an entertaining area, as a small oasis. We live in a high plains desert, and we only need a small amount of intensively watered landscape. Zone 2 is an intermediate water-use area and transitions into zone 3, or the most xeric (dry) portion of your landscape. Most fruits and vegetable crops fall into zones 1 or 2. Native plants that provide edible low-water use

landscapes include serviceberry, currants, and some elderberries. All of these xeric plants perform well in zone 2, and all fruit crops benefit from winter watering in the dry months.

Consider incorporating several fruit trees into your landscape. Fruit crops are often a larger initial investment and may not yield for several years, but don't be put off by this. What could be better than tasting your first apple or that first bite of home-grown rhubarb in a pie? Start with smaller plants if you can find them. Research shows that young, small root systems, once established, out-perform larger specimens of the same cultivar (or cultivated variety). In the front range of Colorado, consider apples, plums, pears, sour cherries, grapes, and in protected sites peaches and apricots. Shrub fruits include elderberries, currants, gooseberries, brambles, serviceberries, and quince. Limit the use of brambles (i.e., red raspberries) in the landscape as they can be aggressive growers and use very high levels of moisture.

After adding a fruit tree or two, consider mixing in herbs or perennial vegetables such as rhubarb or asparagus. Select your herbs according to your likes and dislikes, and think about lining pathways with your favorite herb as a border. Over the last thirty years I have grown eclectic xeric gardens, mixing up edible plants within the traditional flower border in every landscape. Herbs blend well in flower beds and lend themselves to all irrigation zones. For example, woody-stemmed herbs like rosemary or thyme can survive a great deal of hot and dry. You can feel the texture, indicating an ability to withstand drought stress. Thyme can even be used as a turf alternative. Other herbs with thin leaf surfaces that can be easily damaged (for example, basil) generally need more moisture.

Mix up your garden by placing chili peppers, eggplant, or other plants with similar growth characteristics in blank spots in the landscape.

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Landscapes designed and planted correctly allow space for plants to mature. Try planting crops that bolt with the first heat wave (lettuce, spinach, etc.) in several areas of your landscape. The first spring crop will arrive early if planted on the south side of your home. Plant additional seeds on the north side of the home in the shade and enjoy additional greens until mid-June. Another idea for gardening is to “layer” plants along fences or even sides of boulders, first using a quick spring vegetable crop (peas, lettuce, radish, etc.) and place an herb just beside the early crop. Traditionally this follows the French intensive or bio-intensive cropping.

Another appealing idea is to add a vertical element to your landscape. Think about using containers to grow herbs and vegetables with trellises in the garden, patio, or even at your apartment. Combining a vertical element may include a garden using the three traditional sisters theme (corn, squash and beans). Allow the garden to evolve from traditional ideas with traditional plants to a vibrant, exciting, and edible landscape.

If you can convert some space at home, plan on installing a drip or similar system to decrease irrigation needs. Overhead irrigation uses more water and can be a source of disease throughout the garden. Drip conserves water, and often the initial conversion cost is recovered during that first growing season. Don't forget to check with local ordinances, especially homeowner

associations (HOAs) that still limit gardening vegetables, herbs, or fruit in the yard. During these tough economic times, I would urge HOAs to consider permanently lifting these strict parameters. Besides, what is prettier than vine crops such as peas, beans, grapes, or even tomatoes gracing and softening the ubiquitous fences in so many developments in the region?

For more information about edible landscaping, check out your local garden center and local nursery. Buying plants at the local farmers' market makes sustainable sense too. Farmers already know what grows well here, and they can't afford to plant unproven performers. The Center for ReSource Conservation can provide you with additional sustainable landscaping resources. Happy gardening! •



Herb gardens grow in the most unconventional of planters

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