

Edible Landscaping

Edible landscaping is the practical incorporation of edible plants into the conventional landscape to create a sustainable and productive living space. It is a creative way to merge the vegetable garden and the ornamental garden into one seamless space. Creating an edible landscape involves replacing ornamental trees, shrubs, perennials, and annuals with plants that are not only ornamental, but can also be used for food. An edible landscape is adaptable to any scale such as a small patio to an acre lot, and can be 1-100% edible.

Design and Maintenance

Edible landscaping uses the same design elements as any traditional landscape requires. It requires a set garden style whether formal or informal. It also requires unifying elements such as hardscape materials to make it work as a whole. There is still the repetition of plants, colors, textures, and shapes, but edible landscaping goes a step further by weaving in functional plants. For example:

- Try an annual bed filled with leafy salad greens and pepper plants instead of a bed of vinca.
- Use a hedge of blueberry bushes to block the view instead of a holly hedge.
- Add height to a garden with obelisks planted with green beans.

An edible landscape will be most productive in a location with 6-8 hours of full sun. Most fruits and vegetables prefer well-drained soil with a pH of 6.0-7.0. Consider doing a soil test to check pH and soil nutrient levels before adding any



Figure 1. A garden with tomato plants.

plants. Good production will require supplemental watering and close monitoring of pest populations. Amending soil annually with organic matter will help boost production.

Tips for Success

- Begin by compiling a list of the foods and herbs your family prefers and add these plants to your landscape. This will not only save money but also help to get the whole family involved in growing the garden. Starting small will increase your chances of success without feeling overwhelmed.
- Plan your beds carefully. Plants that need to be harvested frequently, such as lettuce or beans need to be in the front of a border to allow for easy access. Incorporate plants that require infrequent harvesting such as garlic

and asparagus into the back of planting beds or in out of the way areas.

- Make harvesting easier by incorporating benches or large flat stones into beds. This provides you with a place to work without compacting soil or trampling surrounding plants. Also, keep annual crop beds shallow (about 4 feet deep); they should be no deeper than you can comfortably reach.
- Make the most out of your seasons. Harvesting cool season crops such as parsley, lettuce, and chard can be extended into the summer months by planting them in partial to full shade. Alternately, grow tropical edibles such as citrus in containers. Bring them indoors to enjoy their bounty when temperatures drop in the fall.

Ways to Maximize Production

There are a few key ways to make your landscape as productive as possible. Begin by researching plant varieties before you buy them. Many fruit trees and shrubs have varieties that will ripen at different points in the season of either early, mid, or late harvest. By carefully reading the plant descriptions, it is possible to spread out the harvesting of a certain crop. For example, if you choose one early season and one late season apple tree, you will have a steady supply of fruit throughout the apple season.

Use succession planting to spread out the harvest through the season. For example, planting three small crops of carrots about a month apart will spread out the harvest into easily manageable quantities. Planting the same amount of carrots at one time might result in a harvest too large to process in a timely manner, and thus result in waste.

Intercropping is another way to maximize production in a small space. Plant a crop that has a long growing season (about 80 days) giving each plants the spacing it will

need later. At the same time, plant another crop around it that has a very short season (about 30 days). When the long season crop is large enough to use all the space, the short season crop will be harvested and out of the way. Intercropping lettuce and tomato is a great example of using small spaces wisely.

Edible Plants for North Alabama

With a bit of research, it is possible to recreate some of the desirable characteristics found in the ornamental garden using edible plants. Characteristics such as flower color, bold or finely textured foliage, foliage color, and fall color can be found in the edible plant realm. Here is a brief list of edible plants that can be used as replacements for strictly ornamental plants:

Trees

- Apple trees can be used to replace small, spring flowering trees. Dwarf, semi-dwarf, and columnar varieties are available to fit in small spaces. Two varieties are needed for good fruit production, production, so add different varieties throughout the landscape to create a sense of unity.
- Jujube (Chinese Date) is a hardy, self-pollinating fruit tree. It is heat tolerant and has few problems with pests or diseases. It reaches height of 30 feet and can begin producing fruit after two years.



Figure 2. Jujube or Chinese date produces 2-3-inch long fruit in early September.

- Asian persimmons are the self-pollinating cousin of our native persimmon. They produce large, sweet orange fruit in late October. The plant matures into a small tree, reaching 20-feet tall at maturity and has great fall color.



Figure 3. 'Fuyo' persimmon is an Asian persimmon that makes a compact 20-foot tall tree with bright orange fruit in the late fall.

Shrubs

- Blueberry bushes are semi-evergreen with nice fall color. At maturity, they are suitable for a screening hedge or a backdrop plant in a border bed. Rabbiteye varieties such as Brightwell or Climax perform best in North Alabama. They like a very low pH (about 5.5) and good drainage.
- Figs grow into a large shrub, but can be pruned back annually to make harvesting easier. Their bold foliage is a good replacement for hydrangea in the ornamental landscape.
- Blackberry and raspberry brambles work well as a backdrop planting or can be trained onto a trellis system in narrow areas. They grow quickly to fill in bare areas. Look for thornless varieties for easier harvesting.
- Rosemary can be used in the place of boxwood as a low hedge to border the garden pathways.

Vines and Groundcovers

- Muscadines are North Alabama's answer to grapes. Because these native vines are more tolerant of our heavy clay soils and high humidity, they require fewer pesticide and fungicide applications. Their bold foliage and vigorous growth make them a good fit for arbors or pergolas.
- Strawberries make a thick semi-evergreen groundcover or edging plant for the front of a perennial border. White flowers in spring are followed by colorful red fruit.
- Potato and sweet potato plants work well as a groundcover in sunny areas where the soil has been amended with lots of organic matter. Consider intercropping them with an early crop of lettuce until they fill in their space.
- Thyme and oregano make for a nice groundcover between stepping stones. Walking down the path helps carry scent throughout the garden.

Annual and Perennial Crops

- Grassy foliage can be achieved by using lemon grass, corn, garlic, and onion.
- Bold foliage plants such as watermelon, okra, cabbage, and lettuce can replace plants such as hydrangea, caladium, and begonia.



Figure 4. Red cabbage and chives are paired with orange marigold.

- Lacy foliage can come from plants such as carrots, fennel, dill, asparagus, and kale.

- Annual color can be added with cherry tomatoes, peppers, Swiss chard, red lettuce and eggplants.



Figure 5. Use cherry tomatoes throughout the landscape or on a trellis for accents of red color.



Figure 7. Silver artichoke foliage is paired with annual zinnias and basil to fill out this mixed planting bed.



Figure 6. The silver spiky foliage of artichokes works well with round flowers of the pink zinnias to create an attractive planting in the front of a flowerbed.



Figure 8. The frilly texture of this dwarf blue kale adds interest, while the tomato and marigold add color to the bed.

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