

FOOD FOR HORT

As you drive around your home town how many edible plants can you see in people's gardens? Not many I'm sure - maybe a solitary lemon tree, mango or olive. Think how much more interesting and versatile our gardens would be if we incorporated food plants into the design.

This doesn't mean dedicated vegetable gardens, a few potted herbs or uninteresting rows of fruit trees. For too long we have kept these food-giving plants separate in our minds from our plant-designing palette, in particular ignoring the wonderful ornamental qualities of fruit, rather than flowers. There are food plants for every garden design need and climate zone, so it's easy to add that zesty extra dimension to your planting plans.

In landscape design, plants can be divided into screens for privacy such as hedges and windbreaks, shade trees, specimen trees, edging and borders, groundcovers and climbers. We also look at plants for architectural accent, foliage contrast and to use as focal points. Remember those plants that grow in old-fashioned potager gardens, cleverly exploiting the decorative side of vegetables and herbs. Look at how Mediterranean gardeners have always done food gardens well, with herbs for hedges and edges, espaliered fruit trees, citrus in large interesting pots, standard bay trees and oranges and some fruiting vines on pergolas or warm walls.



coloured vegie and herb border at Heronswood, Vic

Trees, tall hedges and screens

Trees for shade and fruit include walnut, chestnut, mango, macadamia, orange, mulberry, fig, plum, medlar and crabapple. In our modern landscapes, a spreading tree is sometimes a luxury but many fruit trees also make great stilt hedges and espaliers. A row of citrus trees makes a perfect hedge, providing attractive, aromatic fruit and sweet smelling flowers. If your design is for a small courtyard, instead of espaliering camellias try a citrus tree, fruiting pear or fig. Standard olive trees look great as an aerial hedge, especially when underplanted with rosemary or sage. Mulberry can be trained as a hedge and the white fruit variety (*Morus alba*) avoids the problem of fruit stains. Grow fruit trees in large pots on a sunny veranda or in the courtyard. In cooler climates, quince (*Cydonia oblonga*) is a very attractive plant with beautiful yellow pear-shaped fruit and gnarled and twisted branches which look fabulous in winter. In spring there is a bonus of pale pink to white blossom and the fruit is wonderful cooked in pies, made into a paste or added to sauces. Espalier against a sunny wall or grow as an informal hedge. There are several fruiting varieties including 'Smyrna' and 'Champion'. *Ficus carica* (Fig) works well espaliered on a warm wall. It grows best in dry summer areas and where its root zone is restricted. 'Genoa' is a self pollinating variety.

Apples, plums, cherries, almonds and pears are often self-sterile and need compatible pollinators for cross pollination. (Nurseries can provide lists). Other fruit trees can be self fertile such as peaches, figs, nectarines and quinces. Many fruit trees need cold winter conditions for fruiting, although there are some low chill varieties (total hours less than 7°C) to grow in warmer climates. Nashi pears have varieties for warmer areas and can be trained into a pyramid shape for small spaces. There are apple trees to



citrus specimen tree at Bronte House, Sydney



Eco Concepts garden at Sydney in Bloom

suit any size garden from small courtyards and balconies to large gardens. Mini fruit trees are bred for small gardens, being compact but still with plenty of fruit. Peaches and nectarines come in small sizes and some fruit trees are grafted on to dwarf rootstocks which keep the trees small with normal sized fruit. These small fruit trees are ideal for a fruiting hedge. 'Double Jewel' peach has wonderful spring blossoms. Espaliering fruit trees saves on space. They can be shaped in different patterns such as cordons or diamonds. Fruit trees can also be grown in pots but you will need to repot every two years and keep them pruned for a compact shape. Medlars and crabapples make beautiful specimen trees with their attractive blossom and fruit. Persimmon and Pomegranate are attractive trees – try pruning them into an interesting outline by the ancient "Penjing" method. Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*) has shiny green leaves that turn yellow in autumn with red new growth. There are several fruiting species of the Persimmon, the deciduous *Diospyros kaki* and the larger evergreen *D. digyna* or Black Sapote.

Citrus varieties not only have fabulous fruit but can double as small shade trees with glossy green leaves and scented flowers. Orange (*Citrus sinensis*), mandarin (*C. reticulata*) and lemon (*C. limon* cvs) can all be shaped into densely canopied trees. I saw some marvellous old lemons in large pots at Engall's Sydney nursery. They looked fantastic, the gnarled branches covered in blossom and developing fruit. Some citrus (especially orange and mandarin) develop a cropping habit of one heavy and then one light year which can be mitigated by reducing the heavy crop.



Citrus limon at Engall's nursery, Carlingford, Sydney

Shrubs and low hedges

Guava species make useful hedging plants. Guava (*Psidium guajava*) is a tropical evergreen shrub with green leaves that are silver underneath. The fruit is delicious and there is the added



tahitian lime and cabbage at Sydney RBG



cumquat at Engall's nursery, Carlingford, Sydney



unusual two-part leaves of *Citrus hystrix*

varieties and can form thickets. Some varieties prefer shade, boggy ground and acid conditions and some deciduous species colour well in autumn.

bonus of brightly coloured maroon edible flowers. Strawberry and yellow cherry guava (*P. cattleianum* and *P. cattleianum* 'Lucidum') also have delicious fruits and will thrive in warm temperate zones. *Murraya koenigii* (curry tree) is a small tree or shrub with dark green compound leaves used in curries (much better fresh than dried).

Smaller citrus can be planted in pots, espaliered, planted in rows for an informal hedge or clipped as an aerial hedge. Popular varieties are kaffir lime (*Citrus hystrix*) which has interesting double leaves used in Asian cooking and Tahitian lime (*C. aurantifolia*) for juice. The lemonade plant with fruit sweeter than a lemon, cumquats, and lemons. Another newish plant is the Red grapefruit with sweet red flesh.

An unusual way to grow a variety of fruit on one small plant are the multi-grafted 'fruit salad' trees. Available as collections of stone fruits, apples, nashi pears or citrus, each carries up to 8 different varieties on a shrub-sized 2.5 x 2.5m plant.

Plant rosemary (*Rosemary officinalis*) as a hedge, tightly pruned for a more formal look or showing off the lavender blue flowers in an informal hedge. The prostrate variety is a good spillover plant. While the familiar *Camellia* varieties make an attractive hedge, for a change try planting *Camellia sinensis*. Tea is produced from its tender young shoots. For topiary or hedges, bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) will grow into a small tree but its dark green leaves can be clipped to any shape. The dried leaves add wonderful flavour to many savoury dishes. *Coffee arabica* is another evergreen shrub that makes a good small hedge plant. It has fragrant white flowers and red fruit which contain the coffee beans. Both tea and coffee plants require a cool but frost free climate (eg elevated sub-tropical). Blueberries come in low chill

Perennials, borders and groundcovers

Grow edible salvias. They look great in pots and can add colour to a small balcony or courtyard. They can also be used as edging plants or planted in drifts. *Salvia officinalis* (Common Sage) is used for many herbal remedies as well as a prime flavouring ingredient in poultry stuffing. The grey green leaves set off by the mauve flowers create a vivid contrast or choose one of the variegated forms (which will still taste the same). Another sage, *Salvia elegans* (Pineapple-scented sage) can be grown in the herb garden or as an informal hedge. The aromatic leaves have a fruity scent and are often used for teas and salads.

Herbs and some vegetables make great groundcovers or border and edging plants. Curly leafed parsley with its bright green leaves stands out along the edge of the garden, as will the formal rosettes of many lettuce varieties. Chives grow in soft clumps and have the added bonus of pretty mauve (and edible)



kids garden by Melissa King at GAL, Melbourne



lettuce border



herbs, veges & birdbath, Caldicott garden, Sydney

flowers. Oregano, marjoram and thyme come in a range of foliage colours and variegations so you make your own colourful, aromatic carpet. Other excellent ground covers include Corsican mint, bush tucker herbs native mint (*Mentha satureioides*), native parsley (*Apium prostratum*), and for light, sandy soils *Tetragonia tetragonioides* (Warrigal spinach).

Architectural and accent plants

Jerusalem artichokes grow quickly and although they sometimes become weedy the edible tubers are terrific in soups. For a striking textured effect try *Cynara scolymus* (Globe artichoke). From the thistle family, it has spiky divided silver leaves with globular purple thistle-like flowers which can be eaten when young. Use for foliage contrast and for an architectural look. They tolerate coastal areas. A close relative is *Cynara cardunculus* or Cardoon with grey green leaves and spiky purple flowers. Edible parts are the leaf stalks. Edible ginger and *Canna edulis* provide food while adding accent and a tropical look to the garden as does the taro. Try edible bamboos for a quick screen being careful to contain the running varieties. *Opuntia ficus-indica* or Indian fig is an interesting (but very prickly) fruiting cactus for a hot courtyard or balcony.

While we think of Rhubarb in yummy pies and crumbles it can also look terrific used as a specimen large-leaf texture contrast or

in borders and mass planted in drifts. The large light green leaves contrast with the pinky-red stalks.

Strong, upright form is very useful plant design tool. For edible versions, try shallots from the onion family, which will grow to about 40cm. Taller lemon grass can be used as an accent plant in the tropical to warm temperate garden but it will also grow in a protected area in colder climates, forming a large upright clump. Although we associate Fennel with the weeds growing by the roadside there is a variety called 'Florence', a non-invasive plant which can be grown in the garden both for its feathery leaves, yellow flowers and as a vegetable. Sweet Fennel can also be grown in coastal areas.

Climbers

Training fruiting vines over a pergola is another way of using food plants in the landscape. Favourite species are table grapes and kiwi fruit. Both are deciduous, allowing winter sun to shine through. Kiwi fruit or Chinese Gooseberry need male and female to pollinate so plant one of each but only the female will fruit. Other species to try are passion fruit and the old-fashioned choko vine. Passionfruit is quick growing and will soon cover a trellis or wire fence. Pear trees can also be trained over an arched archway with the fruit hanging beneath.



artichoke and oregano, Sydney RBG

Bush Tucker

Native bush tucker plants are becoming more popular and are great for your landscape design. There are native nut trees, citrus and berry trees as well as trees with aromatic leaves that can be used to add flavour to your favourite dishes. The well-known *Macadamia integrifolia* is an attractive tree with glossy leaves and white flowers. The nuts are nutritious and delicious. Buy a grafted cultivar for your area. The finger lime (*Citrus australasica*) is a prickly shrub ideal for drier areas. Cultivars to look for are 'Rainforest Pearl' and 'Blood Lime'. There are a number of Australian native fruiting plants that are excellent in the landscape. *Santalum acuminatum* or native peach will make an attractive informal hedge. It can take some years to set fruit but once it does is very prolific. Use for an informal hedge for areas with a dry winters. The very decorative Davidson's Plum (*Davidsonia pruriens*) will grow in Sydney or north and has large light green leaves and large, dark blue-black fruit which makes a great jam. Spicy leafed plants include the lemon scented myrtle (*Backhousia citrifolia*) and the native pepper *Tasmannia lanceolata*. The native pepper is a small shrub with distinctive red stems. The leaves can be used dried or fresh as flavourings. Lemon scented myrtle makes an attractive shade tree, screen or windbreak. Trees with berry like fruits include the silver aspen (*Acronychia wilcoxiana*), Riberry (*Lillypillies*) and native raspberries. The silver aspen has white flowers and flavoursome fruits. It can cope with coastal situations and is quite hardy. Riberry (*Sygygium leuhmanii*), like the other lillypillies, produces abundant red fruit used in jellies and jams. Lillypillies make excellent hedges, screens and bird attracting plants. Use Warrigal spinach (*Tetragonia tetragonioides*), which grows in front-line coastal situations, in Asian stir-fries (blanch it first for a few minutes).

Water Plants

Take an idea from the permaculturists and plant edible water plants in your pond. Chinese water chestnut



macadamia in Roseville, Sydney



davidsons plum at Ourimbah, NSW



edible flowers at Sydney RBG

(*Elaeocharis dulcis*) has edible tubers which are a delicious, nutty feast. Leaves are cylindrical and grow to one metre. Another plant with edible tubers is Duck potato (*Sagittaria sagittifolia*). It has an interesting arrowhead leaf shape, hence the name. Duck potatoes need to be cooked before eating them. *Mentha diemenica* also grows in boggy watery areas as does Vietnamese mint, *Polygonum odoratum*.

Edible flowers

Yes – some are not just pretty faces but can live up a salad or sweet dish. Marigold, calendula and nasturtium flowers add a splash of hot colour to your salad greens. Violets and roses can be dipped in chocolate for an unusual dessert. And rosella (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) bracts make an exotic addition to a glass of champagne!

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Places with more information –

Daleys Fruit 02 6632 1441 www.daleysfruit.com.au

Green Harvest 07 5494 4676 www.greenharvest.com.au

Tropical Fruit World 02 6677 7222 www.tropicalfruitworld.com.au

Flemings Nursery 03 9756 6105 www.flemings.com.au

Engalls Nursery 02 9876 2177

Perry's Fruit & Nut Nursery 08 8383 0268
www.perrysfruitnursery.com.au

Fruit Salad Tree Co. 02 6734 7204 www.fruitsaladtrees.com
www.agric.nsw.gov.au/reader/citrus