

Using Edible Fruit-Producing Plants In The Landscape

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Landscaping a new home or renovating an existing landscape performs several functions. The landscape beautifies the home, increases the value of the property, and makes the area surrounding the home function as an extension of the indoor living space. Traditionally, these objectives are met by the use of various types of ornamental plants, i.e., groundcovers, both deciduous and evergreen shrubs, small flowering trees, and shade trees.

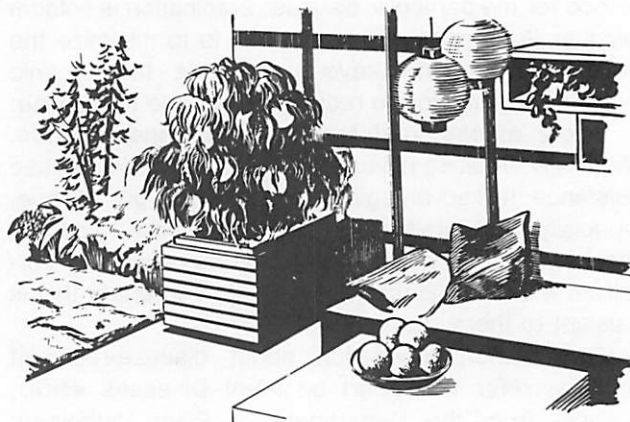
For those who dare to be different from the average urban homeowner, plants producing edible products can be incorporated into the residential landscape. Many of the functions of landscape plantings — screening, defining space, providing interest, and aesthetics — can be suitably served by fruit-producing plants. These plants can provide the homeowner with the enjoyment and relaxation of gardening, as well as the satisfaction of producing fresh, high quality fruit for the entire family at low cost.

It must be emphasized, however, that fruit plants require higher maintenance than the more traditional landscape plants. In order to produce a satisfactory crop, fruit plants must be regularly fertilized, mulched, watered, pruned and trained, sprayed for pests, kept weeded and, of course, harvested. Without these important operations, only low quality produce can be expected.

Designing with edible fruit-producing plants should be done on a gradual basis, adding plants annually until your limit of upkeep is reached. Limiting fruit plants to the outdoor living area — the back and/or side yards — may be a wiser choice than using them on the entire property. This will avoid creating a landscape whose maintenance exceeds the capabilities of the homeowner.

For the established landscape, food-producing plants can be gradually integrated with traditional plantings. New properties can be completely designed but installed in stages, amending plant choices as maintenance limits become apparent. In all cases, the fruit plants should be chosen to perform the same landscape functions as the traditional plant materials. If a large shrub is required, one should not plant an apple tree just to have the fruit.

The most important step in landscaping with fruit plants is proper plant selection. Suitability to the site and performance in a particular climate are the main considerations. Choose plants of the proper size and shape for the location, and then determine which fruit crops satisfy these criteria. This being done, a cultivar



can be selected. Fruit plant cultivars differ in their temperature hardiness, soil tolerance, moisture requirements, and disease resistance. Careful planning before buying plants will reduce future maintenance problems and total cost.

Landscape plants can be classified into groups by use or size. Below is a listing of plant uses, the plants typically utilized to perform these landscape functions, and possible replacements that have edible products.

Groundcovers. Grasses are the most widely used groundcovers. They are easily and rapidly established, can cover wide expanses, are fairly easy to maintain, and can withstand foot traffic. Other kinds of plants are used on steep banks, under trees, and in shrub beds. These include selections such as ivies, vinca, and low-growing evergreen and deciduous shrubs. Runner-producing plants like strawberries and low-growing vines such as dewberries can replace traditional groundcovers. Dwarf blueberries can be established in acid soil. These plants require annual or biennial mowing or pruning.

Container or patio plants. Plantings in containers or tubs are often used for decks, patios, and around homes on very small lots where bed space is limited. Commonly used pot plants are annual bedding plant types such as geraniums, petunias, marigolds and begonias. Pots of dwarf 'Tophat' blueberries, figs, strawberries, or even grapes can be used as replacements for these small, decorative container plantings. (See Fact Sheets FL-5, FL-6, FL-7, & FL-8).

Small trees and shrubs are often used in large containers or tubs when a greener, more lush effect is desired. These can be replaced by dwarf fruit trees such as 'North Star' tart cherry, Stark Bros. 'Sensation' peach, 'Honeyglo' nectarine, and fully-dwarfed spur-type apples, provided that the containers are specially insulated to protect their root systems in the winter months. Even though small in stature, these trees will produce high quality, standard-sized fruit.

Flower beds and borders. Flowering plants are difficult to replace with fruit crops. The flowers of fruit plants are beautiful individually and when viewed close

up, but their floral display cannot rival that of the tried-and-true annual and perennial bloomers. Flower colors of fruit plants are generally limited, with most being white to pink and only a few ranging into the darker reds. They also typically bloom only once a year and then for only a short period of time. Due to the narrow range of colors, the small flower size and the seasonal bloom of most fruit plants, the homeowner who likes the "showy" display of flowers in beds and borders should continue to rely on the wide variety of annuals and perennials available for this purpose. Remember, however, that strawberry plants make a neat and attractive dual-purpose border for ornamental beds.

Hedges and shrubs. By far the largest group of landscape plants, evergreen and deciduous shrubs come in a multitude of sizes, shapes and colors and can be used in almost any landscape situation. Screens, windbreaks, shrub borders, hedges, group plantings, 'living walls', and individual specimens are but a few of the functions shrubs can perform. Included in this group are the honeysuckles, the viburnums, euonymus, juniper, yew, and many more.

There is also a large variety of fruit crops suitable as replacements to satisfy the landscape requirements and also to produce sizable yields of fresh fruit. Currants, gooseberries, blackberries, filberts, and quince make interesting additions to shrub borders. They can also be used as single specimens or in masses. Be sure, however, that their looser, more spreading form is acceptable for the landscape situation. Highbush blueberries require a cool, moist, acid soil and consequently do well when planted in conjunction with the acid-loving rhododendrons, azaleas, and andromeda. Hedges of red raspberries and thorned blackberries are easy to establish due to their free-suckering roots. The Serviceberry, a common ornamental, also produces delicious blue-black fruit in June.

Trees. Trees can be divided into two subgroups: small ornamental trees (8 to 20 feet tall), and large



"I haven't had so much fun since we cleaned out the septic tank...."

shade trees (20 feet and over). Flowering dogwood, Eastern redbud, Amur maple, Star magnolia, and the popular crabapples are small trees frequently used as single "showy" specimens, or placed near patios and decks for their beauty and fragrance. The best use of this group is in corner plantings to integrate the bold lines of the architecture into the landscape beyond.

Dwarf and semi-dwarf fruit trees — apples, pears, peaches, cherries, and plums — can readily replace the common choices. The mature size can be adjusted by careful selection of scion/rootstock combinations. Certain large-fruited varieties of crabapples are good for making jellies and preserves. To some, the fruit of the Pawpaw is a special treat, too.

For trees in the large shade tree category, tall-growing nut trees such as walnut, pecan, butternut, Chinese chestnut (not the blight-susceptible American chestnut), and hickory can be planted. Persimmon trees have beautifully furrowed bark and produce an abundance of fruit every fall. The decision to plant large fruit trees in the suburban landscape must be carefully thought through since large trees are difficult (and dangerous) to harvest and can pose a real maintenance problem for the average homeowner.

For further information. For assistance in selecting the proper species and cultivars, order catalogs from reputable nurserymen and carefully read the plant descriptions. For additional information on cultivar selection and maintenance, the following University of Illinois Extension Service circulars and Department of Horticulture Fact Sheets will be very helpful:

Circular 935 — Growing small fruits in the home garden.
Circular 1013 — Growing tree fruits in the home orchard.
Circular 1102 — Nut growing in Illinois.
Circular 1144 — Controlling weeds in home fruit plantings.
Circular 1145 — Home fruit pest control.

Fact Sheet FL-4-79 — Container soils are different.
Fact Sheet FL-5-79 — Physical properties of a good container soil amendment.
Fact Sheet FL-6-79 — Container soil amendment: what happens when we mix soils?
Fact Sheet FL-7-79 — Water retention of transplanted container soils.
Fact Sheet FR-2-80 — Sources of small fruits.
Fact Sheet FR-7-86 — Fruit cultivars for pick-your-own & retail marketing in Illinois.

Cooperative Extension Service circulars are available through county Extension offices or from the University of Illinois, Office of Agricultural Publications, 47 Mumford Hall, 1301 W. Gregory Dr., Urbana, IL 61801.

Horticulture Fact Sheets are also available from county Extension offices, or from the University of Illinois, Department of Horticulture, 124 Mumford Hall, 1301 W. Gregory Dr., Urbana, IL 61801 (single copies free).

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