

Edible Landscaping

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Edible landscaping involves growing food-producing plants such as fruit and nut trees, berry bushes, vegetables, herbs, and edible flowers in a way that is both productive and aesthetically interesting. Edible species can be included in any style of gardening and can be combined with ornamental specimens to achieve your landscaping goals. Edible landscapes are applicable for residential settings, parks, schools, and businesses.

Garden Goals

It is first important to evaluate your gardening goals. Do you want to produce fresh food for your family? Create a tranquil plant sanctuary? Develop pollinator habitats that offer low maintenance beauty? Gardening projects can accomplish all of these goals, and can also create active and applied learning opportunities for young people. Some practical considerations before getting started include evaluating how much garden space you have to work with, how much time you are interested in spending on your garden, and whether you plan to do the work yourself or hire professionals to design, install, and maintain your garden. Creating a simple budget can also help to see the potential costs associated with creating an edible landscape, including plants, mulch, and soil amendments.

Site Analysis

Your yard is a unique place and is going to have certain characteristics that might make it more or less suitable to growing certain species of plants. Conducting a site analysis will help you become familiar with your landscape and determine which plants can best grow there. Plant hardiness zones indicate which species will be able to survive the winters in your area. The plant hardiness zones of New Jersey range from 6a to 7b, so it is important to select plants that are rated to withstand temperatures associated with their appropriate zones. Most species will require 6 to 8 hours of sunlight to be productive. South facing gardens will receive more sun than north facing gardens, while east facing gardens will receive morning sun and west-facing gardens will receive afternoon sun. Shade produced from buildings or trees must also be taken into consideration. Wind can also impact landscape plantings. Proper airflow is important to reduce disease pressure, though exposed sites can be more susceptible to wind damage. Conduct a soil test to evaluate the fertility levels of your soil and add any necessary amendments before planting your edible landscape.

Planning the Edible Landscape

Planning an edible landscape that includes perennial plants involves consideration of the size that each plant will reach when it is mature. Fruit trees can have a diameter that is up to 20 feet across at

maturity, for example, so it is important to plan for this use of space before starting the garden. Sketch a drawing of how your edible landscape will look when it reaches maturity using the appropriate scale and size of each plant. This will allow you to maximize your use of space and to make any changes on paper before starting to plant trees. Edible landscapes can incorporate layers of plants that occupy different spaces in the garden including trees, shrubs, vines, herbaceous plant, and groundcovers.

Planting Perennials

Perennials may be purchased as bare root or potted plants. Bare root perennials should be planted early in the spring while they are still dormant. Potted perennials can be planted almost any time, but will require extra care and watering if planted in the middle of the summer. To plant a tree or perennial shrub: dig a hole that is 3 to 4 times wider than the container. Make the hole as deep as the container. Remove the pot and place the tree or shrub in the hole. Backfill the hole with soil. Fertilizers are not needed at this time. Water thoroughly. Apply 2-3" of compost and mulch, making sure to keep the mulch away from the base of the tree. Compost that is made from grass clippings, leaf mulch, and wood chips is better for woody perennial plants than manure based composts which can be too rich for these species.

Maintaining the Edible Landscape

Young plants will require regular watering as they are getting established. Do not let weeds compete with your new plantings. Applying compost and mulch will provide slow release fertility over time as your plants grow, while conserving moisture and reducing weed pressure. Fences around yards or individual cages that surround plants can be used to protect plants from animal damage. There are also edible landscape plants that are more resistant to damage from wildlife, such as elderberry.

Learn about pests and diseases that might affect your plants so that you can anticipate and address any problems before they arise. Proper selection of disease resistant varieties and cultural practices that reduce pest pressure and encourage plant health can be very effective in this regard. Different species also have different pruning requirements. Pruning is a great way to get into the garden in the early spring and remove dead branches or stems that will restrict airflow, but you'll want to prune the right branches at the right time to maintain fruit production.

Edible Landscape Plants

Fruit and Nut Trees will be the tallest plants in the edible landscape. Dwarf (8-12') or semi-dwarf (12-15') cultivars can be selected when working with small spaces. While some fruit species, such as apples and pears, will be more prone to pest and disease issues than species such as paw paw and persimmon, planting disease resistant cultivars will help to minimize the need for spraying. Best results for most fruiting species are achieved when they are planted in full sun in soil with good drainage. Fruit trees that can be grown in NJ as a part of the edible landscape include: Apples, pears, peaches, plums, paw paw, persimmon, cornelian cherry, and fig. Nut trees include chestnuts, walnuts, butternuts, pecans, and hazelnuts.

Fruiting Shrubs can occupy smaller spaces and are lower growing than fruit and nut trees. Shrubs typically occupy 3 to 8 feet of space and grow to a similar height depending on the species. Blueberries, beach plum, June berry, elderberry and aronia are all native flowering shrubs that produce edible fruit. Most of these plants are relatively low maintenance and can offer spring flowers, summer harvests, and colorful fall foliage to the edible landscape.

Brambles, such as raspberries and blackberries can be great for the edges of gardens and can form hedges or be trellised along fences. Raspberries will spread easily so be sure to take that into consideration when choosing a site or use a barrier to contain them. Blackberries have different growth habits with erect, semi-erect, and trailing cultivars available. Thornless blackberry cultivars are available and may be an attractive option for the edible landscape.

Vines are a welcome addition to the edible landscape as they can grow in vertical spaces, along fences, or on arbors and pergolas. Fruiting vines can create shade over a deck or patio while occupying minimal growing space along the ground. Grapes, hardy kiwi, and schizandra are several options for fruiting vines that can be grown in NJ. When growing grapes, be sure to select disease resistant cultivars that are suited to this climate for the best results.

Herbaceous Layer Plants include low growing woody and non-woody species in the 1 to 3 foot height range. These can include culinary herbs such as rosemary, parsley, and sage, as well as herbal tea plants such as Echinacea, bee balm, and anise hyssop. Another perennial herb gaining popularity in the edible landscape is lavender, with its strong fragrance and deer resistance. Perennial vegetables including sea kale and Egyptian walking onion are some of the first vegetables available to eat in the spring and are unique in their forms and growth habits. In addition to providing food and herbal tea, many of these plants are excellent for attracting pollinators to the garden.

Ground Covers are low growing plants that can help to shade out and compete with weeds once the plants are fully established. Ideally, weed pressure should be addressed before planting these species to allow them to establish and fill in the space. Nasturtium is a trailing annual flower that has edible blooms. Strawberries spread by runners and will occupy the lower layers of an edible landscape. They will require full sun and good drainage for optimum fruit production and reduced disease pressure. Additionally, creeping thyme is a perennial that can spread along the soil to create a carpet that produces pink flowers that are very attractive to pollinating insects.

Many New Jersey Nurseries are well stocked with edible landscape plants and are happy to help you achieve your gardening goals!

Additional resources for edible landscaping are included below:

The Soil Profile: Edible Landscaping: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/soil-profile/pdfs/sp-v22.pdf>

Soil Testing for Home Lawns and Gardens: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs797/>

Transplanting Trees and Shrubs: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.php?pid=FS376>

Classic and Novel Dessert Apple Varieties for Commercial Orchards in New Jersey

<https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs1303/>

Yellow Fleshed Peach Varieties for NJ: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs1201/>

White Fleshed Peach Varieties for NJ: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs1203/>

Flat Peach Varieties for NJ: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.php?pid=FS1074>

Nectarine Varieties for NJ: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs1204/>

Plum Varieties for NJ: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.php?pid=FS1083>

Establishing Blueberries in the Home Garden: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs750/>

Selecting Blueberry Varieties for the Home Garden: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs419/>

Growing Strawberries in the Home Garden: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs097/>

Ultra-Niche Crop Series: Beach Plum: <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs1297/>

June Berry: <https://smallfarms.cornell.edu/2011/10/juneberries-they-go-where-blueberries-cant/>