



Digging in to edibles

Ornamental edibles continue to change the rules of landscape design

BY TRACY MILLER

THE BACK-TO-THE-LAND movement in the 1970s prompted young people to move in droves to rural settings to try their hand at modern homesteading — growing their own food, living sustainably and mastering animal husbandry.

Decades later, the echoes of that movement were heard in urban food forestry projects and the renewed interest in home growing, even to the extent of ripping up the tidy grass front yards that became popular after World War II.

Now, melding all of those interests, edible landscaping — mixing ornamental and edible plants — has taken a firm hold in the imagination of gardeners and landscapers, who are taking it to the next level. It's creating new opportunities for the nursery industry, especially in concert with the small-space gardening trend.

“Every food crop is flowering,” said Brie Arthur, horticulturist and author of *The Foodscape Revolution*. “It is silly that they were ever excluded from the landscape.”

Arthur has been on the forefront of the current edible landscap-

ing movement, especially in her work with new housing developments. There, homeowners' association (HOA) covenants rule the front yard and raised beds are commonly treated as an infraction.

“The goal is to stop investing in lumber and instead grow within the boundaries of their yards,” Arthur said.

She believes there's no need to plant edibles in a straight line or to segregate vegetables. Such practices reduce biological diversity and increase disease and pest pressure.

“People get excited about edible landscapes,” Arthur said. “They see an opportunity to grow and they want to take advantage of it — they want to feel that they are tangibly doing something.”

Arthur looks forward to the landscape industry catching up and offering more of this blend of agriculture, landscaping and home gardening. The residential landscape becomes more valuable with edible plants interspersed within the ornamental palette, because now it provides something to eat. “There is no need to deny the pleasure of both,” Arthur said.



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Previous page: Blueberry Glaze® (*Vaccinium* × 'ZF08-095' USPP 25467) PHOTO COURTESY OF BUSHEL AND BERRY™

Getting their leafy greens and other smaller edibles

When she is specifying plants, Arthur starts by asking the client several questions (see sidebar, page 22). There are several annual plants that typically epitomize the kind of genetics she taps in her installations of mixed edibles and ornamentals. They include:

Proven Winners Amazel Basil™ — This is the first downy-mildew-resistant basil from University of Florida breeder David Clark. “[It] is a great example of a breeder solving a major problem through improved genetics,” Arthur said. The Italian sweet basil is noted for producing sterile seed to prolong leaf production, so that it lasts all season long.

Pepper Mad Hatter F1 (The AAS 2017 Winner) — A delightful hat-shaped fruit with the productive habit of a habanero, but without the heat. A bushy and compact 3–4 feet, Mad Hatter is a charming ornamental that fills in the space between other plants while also being edible.

Chef's Choice tomato series (2016 AAS Winner) — A deeply disease-resistant fruit that offers everything grocery tomatoes don't. “[It has a] deep flavor and interesting color choices of green with yellow strips, glowing deep pink, and bright orange to work alongside other short shrubs or in the middle of the border as edible focal points,” said Arthur.

Kale Prizm F1 (2016 AAS Winner) — It looks like a soft, curly green forest when planted together and has better heat tolerance and doesn't bolt as early as other varieties of kale. “This is a great option for growers in warm climates,” Arthur said.

Arthur recommends a focus on mixing in these plants and others common to American diets, such as garlic, because they are easy to grow, require very few inputs, and make front yard edible landscaping satisfying and less overwhelming. Plus, if a client doesn't have a landscape or is afraid to grow in the ground, all of it can be grown in containers.



Top: Pepper Mad Hatter F1

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALL-AMERICA SELECTIONS

Bottom: Proven Winners Amazel Basil™ PHOTO COURTESY OF PROVEN WINNERS

nias is another idea. Perhaps surprisingly, rice is another option. Any irrigated landscape that grows coleus, sweet potato vine, and petunia will also make a good home for rice.

“Rice is mistakenly thought of growing only in wet conditions,” Arthur said. “It looks like an ornamental grass, it is beautiful, and needs the same conditions of all those plants.”

One example of a rice plant that works well as an ornamental is *Oryza sativa* ‘Black Madras’.

In Arthur's opinion, it is a better alternative to black mondo grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus* ‘Nigrescens’) that won't collapse in heavy rains.

“It's a practical variety that should be in containers and be in foundation landscapes just like people use ornamental grasses,” she said.

The short-season heirloom rice Carolina Gold, a long-grain variety that grows to 3 feet tall, loves heat and humidity and is rust resistant.

The sesame plant, which can be cultivated and sold in 4-inch pots or gallons, looks like a foxglove and blooms all summer. At the end of the season, it can be harvested and eaten. “It is something that is unusual, very low maintenance and tolerates heat and drought,” Arthur said.

Charlie Nardozi is a lecturer and the author of *Foodscaping*. He said that colorful peas, beans and snow peas — with deep purple pods, yellow pods and other combinations — also blend beautifully into the landscape, providing gardeners with something that looks and tastes good.

Certain varieties of lettuce give a different visual look, with speckles and bicolored leaves. Gardeners can wedge them in at the front of the border with flowering annuals and perennials to great effect.

The same evolution has supported kale's rise, but now offers a greater plant palette to choose from. New choices have emerged, such as the structurally interesting lacinato, or dinosaur, kale, and the colorful and dramatic Redbor kale. >>

According to Arthur, the goal of foodscaping is not to replace ornamental plants, but to fill in the gaps of open mulch space with seasonal vegetables (such as kale, lettuce and colorful mustard) to create an edible groundcover. This significantly reduces weed pressure, makes the landscape colorful and useful, reduces the amount of mulch to buy, and lessens overall maintenance.

Filling vacant space opens up opportunities for promoting and expanding the kinds of edibles that can be used. Get creative. Okra, for instance, looks like hibiscus, and lesser-known edibles such as rice and sesame can engage people on a whole new level. “Those plants can apply to every situation, and my audiences are fascinated by them,” Arthur said.

Planting Swiss chard with the petu-





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Digging in to edibles

Top: First Editions® Standing Ovation™ Serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia* 'Obelisk')
PHOTO COURTESY OF FIRST EDITIONS

Bottom: Frostbite™ Apple PHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY NURSERIES INC.

These plants can be grouped 3–4 together in ornamental beds with a striking appearance. They also have the added benefit of being edible through winter, according to Nardozzi. Gardeners have the opportunity to enjoy looking at and nibbling greens from their landscape year-round.

Trees with edibles

Of course, edible plants are not limited to leafy greens on the ground. Fruiting trees can add interest to any edible landscape.

“We’re selling through our edibles quickly,” said Alec Charais, marketing and communications manager at Bailey (St. Paul, Minnesota). “This is the fun part, because people are more interested in new and unique-looking plants. They’re looking for something different.”

Charais recommends First Editions® Sweet Cherry Pie™ (*Prunus* 'Eubank'). It matures at about 15 feet high by 12 feet wide, is cold hardy to USDA Plant Hardiness Zone 4, and is heavily loaded with fruit. The cherries are great for gardeners interested in home production for jams, jellies and pies.

For more northern markets, Charais said Bailey is eager to add a grandparent of the popular Honeycrisp, Frostbite™ Apple. It works well on dwarf stock up to 9 feet tall, is lauded as a good performer (small fruit, firm texture and sweet taste), and is cold hardy to Zone 4.

At Northwoods Nursery (Molalla, Oregon), owner Jim Gilbert is excited about the three new varieties of the Redlove®



Apple series, with beautiful pink flowers. It has striking solid red flesh that will even make red apple juice. “We have been growing red flesh apples for a long time, but these are superior: easy to grow, disease resistant and tasty,” Gilbert said.

They’re grafted to dwarf or semi-dwarf stock to fit smaller yards.

Then there is fig, which is coming into its own as gardeners discover it and breeders continue to offer more smaller varieties well-suited for patio gardening, smaller yards and for cold-weather climates.

In his talks across the country, Nardozzi said people, especially younger gardeners, are always interested in figs because they like the idea of growing exotic things. As a plus, U.S. fig trees are all self-fertile and deer dislike them.

Jeff Mason, sales representative at Briggs Nursery (Elma, Washington) recommends dwarf hardy red fig (*Ficus carica* 'Little Ruby') because fits perfectly as a container plant, reliably producing at only 3 feet high and hardy to Zone 6.

Mason also notes that Olympian fig (*F. carica* 'Olympian') is also starting to catch on. It is hardy to Zone 6, reliably produces two crops of large green and purple striped figs and matures at 4 to 8 feet tall.

Nardozzi said *F. carica* 'Brown Turkey' and *F. carica* 'Hardy Chicago' do well in containers and in colder climates, with some root pruning as they get older to stay small, and *F. carica* 'Desert King' from Northwoods Nursery is prolific in the Pacific Northwest, reliable and easily maintained at 8–10 feet even in the ground.

Hedges and bushes

Charais believes there are plants that have nice ornamental qualities but don't necessarily get classified that way. For instance, serviceberry is perfect for home gardeners looking to make a nice jam or create a tasty dessert.

The narrow, upright, uniform habit of First Editions® Standing Ovation™ Serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia* 'Obelisk') makes a perfect specimen or hedge, attracts wildlife, has beautiful flowers in spring and turning leaves in fall. ➤➤



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Regent Saskatoon service-berry (*A. alnifolia* 'Regent') is a large shrub, from 6 to 8 feet tall and wide, has fruit that can be eaten straight from the plant and is well-known for its autumn brilliance, Charais said.

Charais considers another good group of edible landscaping options comes from *Aronia*, or black chokeberry. "They are extremely popular for landscaping, in mass plantings or hedges, with little white flowers, although they're more grown for the glossy green foliage," Charais said.

Iroquois Beauty (*Aronia melanocarpa* 'Morton' Iroquois Beauty™) has large fruit high in antioxidants and can be eaten fresh or made into wine or jam. Viking (*A. melanocarpa* 'Viking'), used in European com-



mercial production, has the largest fruit of any the chokeberries. The 4- to 6-foot shrub fits nicely in small landscapes and provides white flowers in late spring, followed by the purple-black fruit and a brilliant display of red foliage in fall.

Viburnum trilobum, the American cranberrybush, although not a true cranberry, has several high-quality tasting varieties, with 'Wentworth', 'Andrews' and 'Hahs' rated the best. Nardoizzi said

Northwoods Nursery offers several varieties of the attractive, spreading shrub — ranging from smaller 2–3 feet high to larger 4–5 feet high — with pretty flowers that attract bumblebees and maintain a compact and uniform habit.

'Blue Moon', which is later blooming, so higher producing on a compact 2- to 3-foot shrub is often recommended matched with its best pollinator, 'Blue Velvet', which is also a compact, mounding shrub. »



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Brie Arthur's quick six questions for customers seeking edible landscaping

- 1 What do you eat on a regular basis?** Start with items that customers love to eat. If Swiss chard is the furthest thing from their palette, it may not be the place to start.
- 2 How much time you have to manage the space?** Be realistic, but also challenge gardeners on traditional ideas of yard. Mowing is time consuming and edible landscaping can be less so. Sometimes, even expanding an existing bed by a foot provides enough space to start some edible plants.
- 3 Where is the sun?** Not all fruiting plants need sun, and placing them appropriately ensures better success.
- 4 What wildlife pressures are you dealing with?** Start by planting their sunniest bed edges with edibles that help deter browsing mammals such as voles, rabbits, groundhogs and deer, including arugula, basil, garlic, onions, peppers and potatoes.
- 5 What will fill in the gaps of your other ornamentals?** The foundation landscape offers a space of over 1,000 feet, with open mulch space that you can grow in equal to 48 traditional raised beds. There is a massive potential that already exists in and around the house.
- 6 Where is the irrigation?** Identify two or three areas that are easy to access, and where harm by pests or ripe fruits will be noticed. If you put the edibles where you have access, they will look better — you manage the space you notice.

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Blueberries and other berries

Blueberry consumption has exploded by more than 500 percent since 2000, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

“Blueberries kind of have become the poster child of edible landscaping,” Nardoizzi said.

That may be one reason for their popularity in the garden. The other is the easy growing.

“They make a good foundation plant, are easy to maintain, have a pH requirement — but that’s not unusual or insurmountable — they attract wildlife, and they have traditional beautiful fall color,” Charais said. “It’s a hard-to-beat list.”

“Wherever you plant a twig dogwood, you should be able to plant a Northern high-bush blueberry, except where wet,” Mason said. “Blueberries are resilient and tolerate bad soil.”

Vaccinium × Cabernet Splash™ ‘VacBri1’ PPAF CPBRAE, a chance sport of *Vaccinium corymbosum* ‘Toro’ that was introduced by Briggs Nursery in 2017, leafs out with dark merlot, glossy burgundy foliage that matures into a mottled green burgundy paired nicely with lighter colored ornamentals and yields a heavy crop, according to Mason. The fall foliage goes from yellow to crimson red, which adds seasonality.

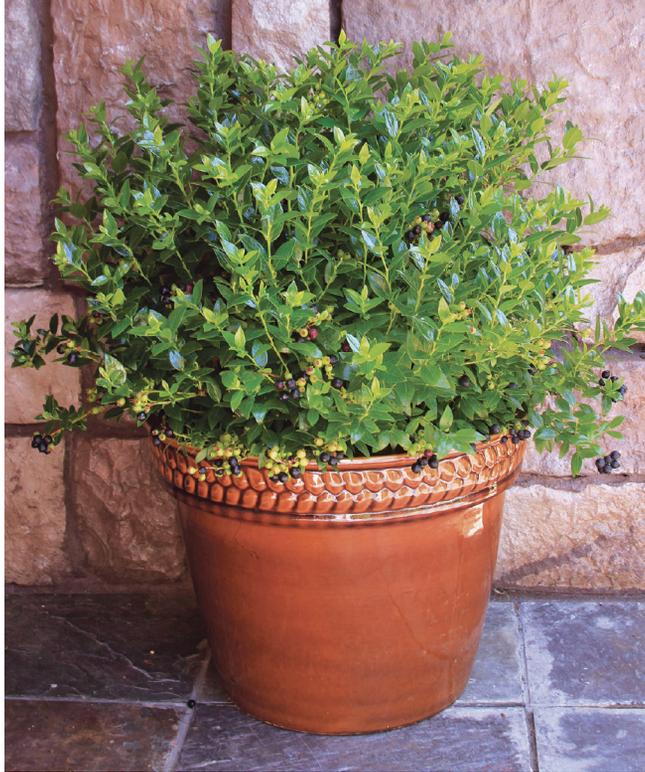
When Briggs first introduced Pink Popcorn™ (*Vaccinium corymbosum* ‘MNPINK1’ PPAF, CPBRAE) 5–6 years ago, the classic-flavored berry with a bright pink cast was dismissed, Mason said. But in this market for new and different, it is now popular for its fruit color and four-season interest on a 5-foot by 5-foot shrub.

Mason also believes a dwarf cross between a Southern and Northern high-bush variety, *Vaccinium* × ‘Sunshine Blue’, makes a great container plant with its rather upright, 4-foot-by-4-foot compact form. “Because it has some Southern in it, its foliage is a bit silver blushed, which persists into the wintertime with mild weather,” Mason said. “The berries are sweet, with a deep flavor profile.”

Several other even smaller blueberry varieties are now available with a vigorous

growth habit and abundant size berries that are versatile in the ornamental landscape in a container, as a border or as a ground cover, and the newer Bushel and Berry™ collection from Star Roses and Plants, with a site in Ventura, California, brings home those possibilities.

Layci Gragnani, rose and edible brand manager, considers the compact Blueberry Glaze® (*Vaccinium* × 'ZF08-095' USPP 25467) and Jelly Bean® (*Vaccinium corymbosum* 'ZF06-179' USPP 24662) to be made for a patio gardener, producing fruit in a container as small as 8 inches. Be forewarned, they will branch out and grow in larger containers or as an accent or short hedge reaching 2–3 feet tall by 2–3 feet wide. With the versatility of growing in and



Blueberry Glaze® (*Vaccinium* × 'ZF08-095' USPP 25467)

PHOTO COURTESY OF BUSHEL AND BERRY™

out of containers, Gragnani recommends these and other blueberries in the Bushel and Berry collection, which offer opportunities for pairing with similar plants like hydrangeas to create an attractive tableau of pink.

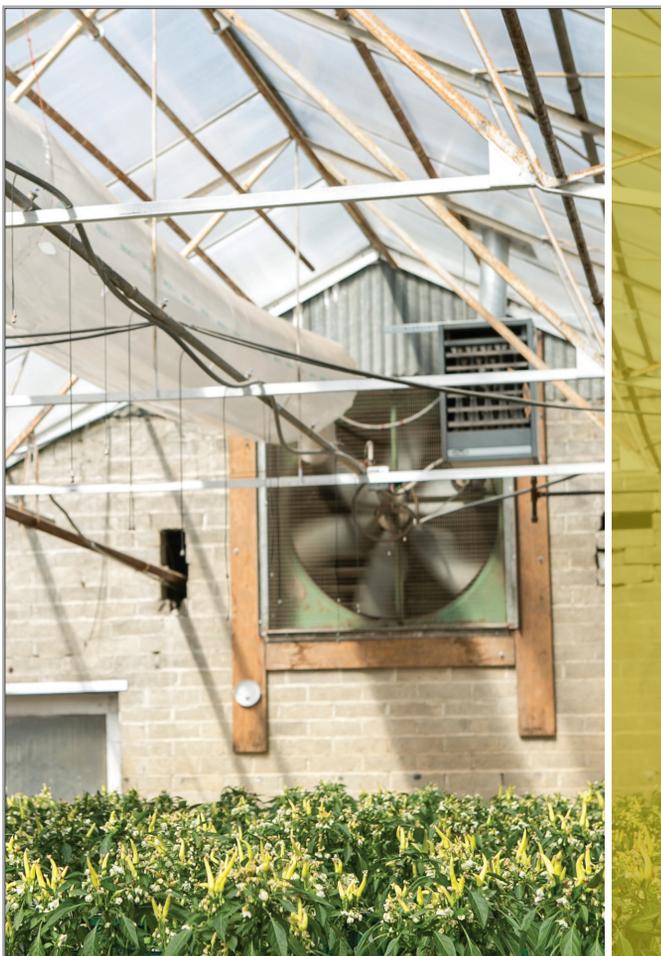
Blueberry Glaze® can also be used as a disease-resistant boxwood replacement. It

is ideal, maturing at 2–3 feet tall and wide. Also ideal for this is Perpetua® (*Vaccinium* × 'ORUS-61-1' USPP 24209), which has two fruiting seasons, in midsummer and in fall.

According to Gragnani, the next introduction of Sapphire Cascade (*Vaccinium* × 'FC-12-029' PPAF) and Midnight Cascade™ (*Vaccinium corymbosum* 'FC12-187' PPAF) has everyone excited, for their cascading habit and deep red

foliage in the winter that can be used in hanging baskets and as an 18- to 24-inch wide groundcover.

But growers, and gardeners, are eyeing other berries for small spaces, starting with Bushel and Berry™ Raspberry Shortcake®, a revelation as a bush-type, thornless >>



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Bushel and Berry™ Raspberry Shortcake®

PHOTO COURTESY OF BUSHEL AND BERRY™

raspberry made for container growing. Charais believes other varieties such as Fall Gold (*Rubus idaeus* var. *strigosus* 'Fall Gold') and Caroline (*Rubus occidentalis* 'Caroline'), that are everbearing and can remain compact, also work well in containers.

The interest in berries clearly has also jumped the container with strawberries, which Arthur specs as a groundcover, where in less than six months they can provide something for a homeowner to appreciate. At Bushel and Berry, producing a strawberry with the same kind of qualities as the blueberries is Gragnani's next number-one priority.

Mason states that there are other berries, like the highly in demand Koralle Lingtonberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*), which



is easy to grow with just a little bit of care. It can be planted like a blueberry, as a specimen, but also in rock gardens or in drifts to form a solid groundcover. The added benefit is two crops in late summer and early fall.

As a proponent of edible landscaping, Arthur hopes that one day the idea of

weaving favorite food crops into the landscape will be a common approach to gardening, just a logical approach to making the most of the square footage available for homeowners.

"Edibles are a beautiful addition to the traditional landscape and help engage people in a meaningful way," she said. "There are endless possibilities. We haven't even scratched the surface of this realm, and the economic possibility for our industry.

I am confident at the end of the day that there is more." ©

Tracy Ilene Miller is a freelance writer and editor who covers several topics, including gardening. She can be reached at tracyilenemiller@gmail.com.

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