

Let's all do: Polite Gardening

the Onion &

For the second in his series on permaculture tips around the garden Patrick Whitefield offers two examples courtesy of his green fingers.

Polite gardening

The belief that productive plants should be kept out of sight seems to date from the industrial revolution. Before that time most people's gardens contained a mix of fruit, vegetables, flowers and herbs. There was no assumption that if something was productive it must be hidden from view, in effect that it's ugly.

In fact most things in everyday use were beautiful. Sailing ships, horse-drawn wagons and windmills spring to mind. All are a blend of natural materials and energy sources on the one hand with manual skills on the other. Of course there were ugly things, but in general the more efficient they were the more beautiful. Only when fossil fuels came on the scene did the possibility of something being both ugly and really useful really arise.

When the expression 'Where there's muck there's brass' was first coined it wasn't a truism but a shocking revelation of how much the world had changed. But it soon became accepted as a universal rule, and easily led to the assumption that anything of practical value was inevitably mucky. The vegetables, being useful, were banned to their hidden place behind the privet hedge.

It often surprises me how deeply ingrained this attitude has become. Design clients who are pretty progressive and relaxed in their other attitudes often go a little stiff when visible vegetables are mentioned, quietly saying they'd rather stick with the traditional arrangement and keep them at the end of the garden.

But we don't need to stick with a tradition which is a product of the fossil fuel age. We're preparing for the solar age, and there's every reason why we should celebrate our vegetables.

Edible-Ornamental Gardening

There are many plants which are both edible and ornamental. Some are food plants which are especially attractive to look at, others are ornamentals which also happen to be edible.

The bright red stems of ruby chard, the delicate spirals of romanesco broccoli and the scarlet flowers of runner beans are some of the more outstanding vegetables. In fact both runner beans and tomatoes were grown purely as ornamentals when they were first introduced from the New World. Most herbs are attractive, and many different varieties have been bred, often with more difference in their appearance than in their taste. The green, purple and variegated sages are examples. Fruit trees are especially attractive when they're in blossom, and in many cases the fruit itself is pretty. Some, like the purple cherry plums and filberts, have attractive leaves, and the bark of the cherry gives visual interest in winter.

These plants can be components of an edible-ornamental design, but the essence of the genre is not the components but the composition. Even quite ordinary vegetables can be put together in such a way that the contrast between their shapes, sizes, leaf textures and shades of green make an attractive picture. Imagine, for example, what can be done with parsley, chives, carrots, Swiss chard and sprouting broccoli. An accent of colour added to this, perhaps with a few lollo rosso lettuces or by allowing the chives to flower, can make a display which is quite as beautiful as a bank of bedding plants, though somewhat more subtle.

This is the basis of the French potager style of garden. The word literally means vegetable garden, but in English at least it is used for a vegetable garden designed to please the eye. The overall layout of the garden, and the placing of the vegetables themselves form the basis of the design, with herbs, fruit and a few flowers added to set off the natural beauty of the vegetables.

When designing an edible-ornamental garden, or a purely ornamental one, the first things to consider are where the garden will most often be seen from, and the people's personal preferences in beauty. Given this information there are a number of principles which can be used to guide the design:

- Place shorter plants near the front of the view and taller ones at the back.
- Wherever possible combine vertical plants or features with low-growing plants.
- Think of colour and texture combinations. What will look well together?
- Place plants in situations where they will naturally thrive, eg woodland plants in shady places, drought-loving ones in hot, dry places. This will give natural, harmonious combinations, and the plants will grow well with the minimum of care.
- Design for year-round interest. Some plants flower for a relatively short period. Fruits and autumn leaves can give colour later in the year.
- Include some water, if only a tiny pond.
- A view which can't be seen all at once is attractive: a path which curves away from the viewer and disappears can give a feeling of space and mystery to a small garden.

*Patrick Whitefield teaches and writes widely about permaculture. His last book was, **How to make a Forest Garden**, published by Permanent Press.*

the Ornament