**Creating a Kitchen Garden**

**by Christine Windle**

Creating a kitchen garden for herbs, vegetables and fruit is a great way to provide healthy fresh food for your family and friends. It also enables you to learn about different varieties, to experiment and to have that wonderful connection with the soil and growing things. It is a fine feeling when you announce that the food you are serving came from your garden.

My childhood was full of kitchen gardens – a neatly hedged vegie and herb garden at our great grandma’s, an extensive but relatively ad hoc collection of vegies at our grandparents’ and our own suburban garden where we played amongst fruit trees and where rhubarb and silver beet were planted under the climbing roses. Joe over the road grew Roma tomatoes, capsicums, eggplants, grapes - every type of fruit and vegetable you could imagine and many which our more limited menu did not include. I tasted my first beautifully sweet baby carrot and raspberries from the canes at a school friend’s home when I was eight. Neighbours shared tips and excess produce in a way that drew us together.

I was reminded of all this earlier this year when two young people from our street popped in to give us some of the delicious produce they had grown. It was such a lovely gesture and their enthusiasm and success with their garden was a joy to see.

A kitchen garden can include anything that can be eaten or imbibed and plants that have other household uses such as lavender, a few sprigs of which can help with sleep. Many people create separate areas for orchards, herbs, vegetables and flowers while others combine some or all of those elements. I love kitchen gardens because they are always changing and are real harbingers of the seasons. It is so exciting to harvest the first tomato of the year and to experience that home grown tomato taste again. I also like the colours and forms of the plants and the way some, such as beans, grow so quickly, almost in front of your eyes.

There are practical reasons for putting some edibles together and keeping some apart. Some plants grow in a season and are harvested so the beds have a constant changeover of crops. Others, such as asparagus and rhubarb, stay put year after year. Some plants, such as apple trees, create too much shade for planting under in summer but can be planted near in winter when they lose their leaves. Some plants have beneficial effects on other plants, for example, planting calendulas in with vegies encourages bees and promotes pollination. Others do not do so well together, for example, onions are not happy with peas. There are lists for companion planting on the internet and in books but there is no substitute for asking other gardeners about their experiences and what works well in your area.

Another practical consideration is water – nearly all edibles need watering in summer. Exceptions would be some herbs and trees from dry places, like lavenders and olives. Check the water needs of your edibles and put ones with similar needs near each other. Use dripper line watering to suit the plants – tomatoes are relatively shallow rooted and need less water more often, while silver beet benefits from deeper less frequent watering.

A kitchen garden is a great way to encourage children to be interested in gardening and in eating a wider range of vegetables and fruit. Let them choose some of the plants that go in or have their own little patch to work on. We once grew giant pumpkins. Our children helped care for them, measuring the girth and weight until one emerged as the outright winner. We still have photos of that pumpkin, surrounded by its proud growers.

Choose a sunny spots for edibles, being careful to consider the overall plan and uses of your garden. A home rule for back yard cricket at our house was ‘hit a fruit tree and you are out’. A better plan might have been to consider the cricketers and their increasing ability with the bat before planting the trees so close to the pitch.

What should you grow? Only what you like to eat or would like to try, only things that you have the time to look after and the space to grow and only things that will succeed in your area. Some crops that give good returns and are delicious fresh from the garden, must haves for me, are tomatoes, peas, beans, cucumbers, zucchinis, silver beet, garlic, lettuce, carrots and eggplant. This year we are trying six varieties of tomatoes – Stupice, Grosse Lisse, Tommy Toe, St Pierre, Aussie Red and Clive’s Tomato – and look forward to the fun of a little taste test. We cook and garnish with many herbs but a basic list would include rosemary, basil, parsley, oregano, different thymes and a lovely array of mints. Vietnamese mint, not really a mint at all, can be substituted for coriander and is an excellent addition to Thai style cooking. The leaves of the lemon scented verbena give off a gorgeous aroma when crushed and can be used for making tea.

If I could only have three fruit trees, I would plant an apple (a three way apple with varieties fruiting at different times, one of them to be the reliable multi-purpose good keeper Granny Smith, one the delicious heirloom, Court Pendu Plat and the last a Jonathon for crunch and handy eating size), an apricot (probably a Moorpark but could be the early fruiting Divinity) and a lemon (Eureka for year round lemon production). Grapes, berries and passionfruit are great additions to any garden although I have found that passionfruit need a frost free microclimate and considerable water while grapes and strawberries need protection from blackbirds and children, if you are to taste any. A friend nearby grows kiwi fruit on a support surrounding her large tank, creating a little shaded walkway – inspiration to use edibles as features.

There are many benefits to your health and the environment in growing your own food organically. Kitchen gardening, whether in a few pots or a whole garden, will give you great joy, along with an area of interest with which to experiment and play around. Indeed, creating a kitchen garden literally gives you a licence to ‘play with your food’, at least before it reaches your plate.

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