

Creating a Potager

A potager, pronounced pot-ar-shay, is a decorative vegetable garden. ‘Potage’ is French for soup, and a potager was the garden where herbs and vegetables for the pot were grown. Potagers ranged from humble kitchen gardens to grand multi-bed formal designs with hedging and intricate colour and textural planting. I am currently having lots of fun creating a modest potager in our front garden.

Of course, fruit, vegetables and herbs can be integrated into any garden with the right growing conditions and don’t have to be segregated. So why would you bother to set up a special area for them? The number one reason, particularly in southern Victoria, is that food crops require more water than the low water general garden plants suited to our climate. It is practical and convenient to group the edibles together according to their water needs. It is handy for other tasks such as feeding the soil, harvesting and rotating crops. It allows for the changing nature of the beds as crops take their turns and are harvested.

What really appeals to me is the charm of entering a special space, lured along little paths and beguiled by the gorgeous colours and forms of food plants and edible flowers. It will be an area where I can play at gardening, with the shape of the beds and perennial planting creating the permanent structure and the annual and biennial vegetables allowing me to indulge my creativity again and again.

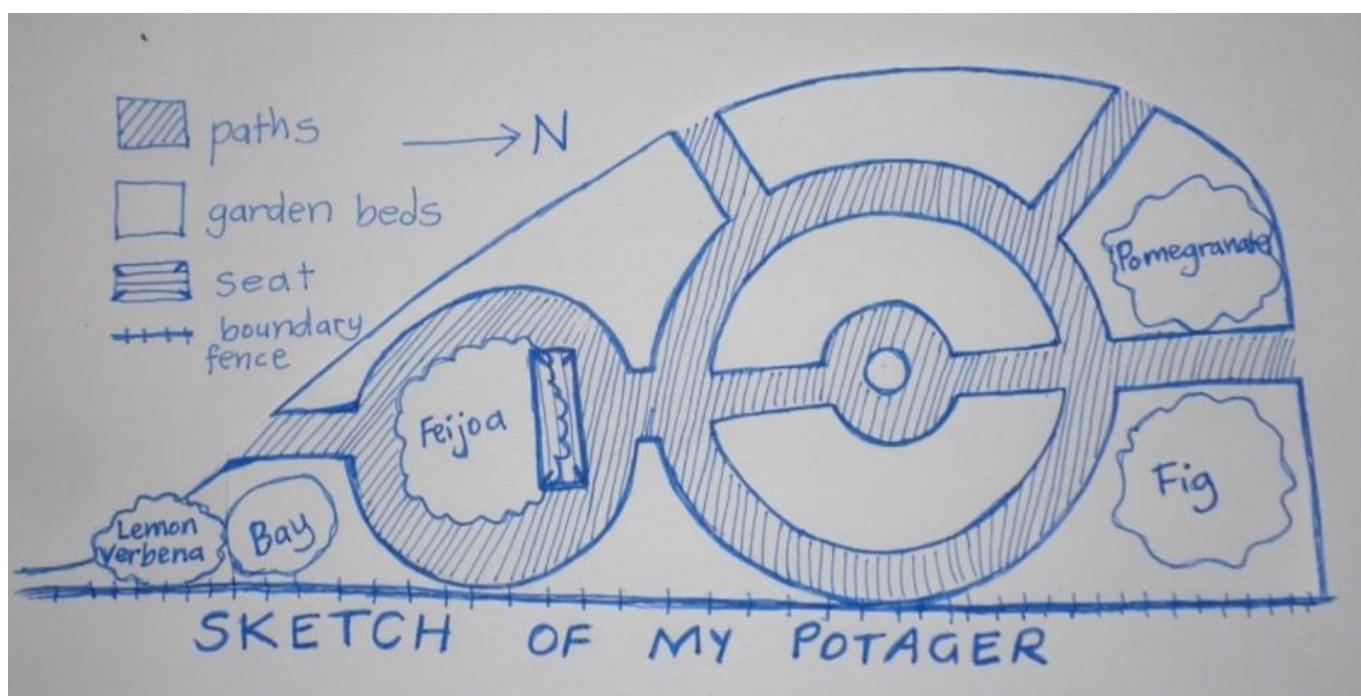
Selecting the site was easy – it needed full sun, access to water and proximity to the house. We also wanted our potager to be able to be bypassed, just in case it has less beautiful moments or even times of neglect. The size was dictated for us by the boundary fence, allowing for movement to the main garden, and keeping away from the roots of a large tree. We used the hose to establish the size and shape of the outside edge of the potager and then placed clumps of straw along the line so it was more obvious.

While a potager can be free form, there are a few basics which help to create atmosphere and practicality.

1. Include some vertical elements – arches, bean tee-pees, arbours, trees and vines, topiary, statues
2. Have paths that can be negotiated with wheelbarrows
3. Make beds a good size so that you won’t have to walk on them, compressing the soil. A bed you can access from both sides can be wider than one with one-sided access. Stepping stones can help.
4. Designs based on circles and squares, or combinations of circles and squares, give a traditional feel.

5. Keep the design simple. Larger beds allow you to plant larger plants and patterns.
6. Incorporate focal points and seats to enjoy and relax from your labours.
7. Use hedges and windbreaks as part of the design. Edibles such as rosemary and feijoas work well.
8. Plant what you will really use.

Our potager is a curved, roughly triangular shape, with two connected circular beds inside. The other beds are irregular shapes surrounding the circles. The design went from having one entry to having four, to make it easier to harvest the trees. The whole design was laid out in straw, allowing us to try it out with the wheelbarrow and check site lines in and out of the garden.



What to plant? I am going to include plants that can be eaten, used for cosmetic or medicinal purposes, will encourage beneficial insects or that will provide a good environment for plant growth. They will need to be ones we like and ones which grow in our area. Or they might simply be beautiful.

Here is my list of perennials: fig, pomegranate, bay and feijoa trees, French lavender, Tuscan rosemary, grapes, lemon verbena, thyme, chives, garlic chives, parsley, dianthus, rhubarb, sage, salvias.

Vegetables and short term plants: strawberries, lettuce (various forms and colours), greens, silverbeet, cabbage, broccoli, peas, beans, sunflowers, violas, calendulas, cherry tomatoes, eggplant, peppers and leeks.

Plants to encourage beneficial insects: violas, borage, catmint, members of the daisy family, lavender, lemon balm, rocket and various herbs (allowed to flower), poppies, calendulas, yarrow, white cosmos, penstemons and salvias.

This limited list is based on what can be grown in a small space, grows neatly and is decorative, and would be handy to be accessed readily from the kitchen. extensive crops and messy growers will continue to find a home in the large vegetable gardens at the bottom of our orchard.

So why not look for a spot at your place for a potager. You, too, can have some fun setting out designs, indulging your creativity and reaping the rewards for your pot.

Workshops – Book In - Ring 0403 267 286 All workshops – notes and morning tea.

Planning a Backyard Orchard – Sunday June 5th, 9 – 11.30, \$25

Garden Design and Planning – Sunday June 19th, 9 – 11.30, \$25

Orchard Pruning – Sunday July 17th, 9 – 12.30, \$35, theory and hands on practice in our orchard

Happy gardening, Christine and Keith Windle,
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