

## Not to Be Overlooked: Ornamental Vegetables

by Honey Sharp

Who would deny that vegetables are beautiful? And yet, what first comes to mind when we think legumes? Tasty, good-for-you or, perhaps, simply boring. Next comes looks. However, I'd bet my "Berkshares" (a local currency that trades at a 10% discount) that looks are not far behind. To behold those smooth, crimson, shiny, Heritage, i.e. not well-groomed tomatoes at an August farmers market invariably teases my appetite. As we all know, the arts of cooking and gardening run hand in hand: both engage all the senses - well, cooking is one step behind since gardeners can enjoy song birds.

Although ever so simple and straight rows of arugula, asparagus and beets remain a visual delight, a whole spectrum of vegetables can be relished in flower borders or clay pots alike. No need to segregate them or dedicate them to a specific portion of land either.

While some hold more decorative, call it aesthetic, potential than others - and are being bred specifically for this purpose - vegetables have been combined for centuries with herbs and flowers, also prized for their edible and/or medicinal value.

Medieval gardens are a case in point. While it might appear that a distinguished tea rose might balk at rubbing shoulders with a common cauliflower, there are cases where they have been discovered in bed together. Ferruccio Vitale, a renowned landscape architect, known for his outstanding Gilded Age gardens such as Brookside in Great Barrington, was not loath to experiment. As R. Terry Schnadelbach states in Ferruccio Vitale, Landscape Architect of the Country Place Era:

"Vitale's treatment of the rose garden's parterres was quite startling and beautiful. The beds contained unusual combinations of vegetables, seasonal flowers, and roses... Each bed was edged with alyssum. Cabbage and broccoli were scattered throughout." (And, let us not forget that rose petals are a delicacy in Turkish desserts...)

Should we not be so bold as Vitale, we can turn to what are called in today's lingo: "ornamental vegetables". By using an imaginative and playful touch, their presence will invariably lend elegant form, fine texture and unusual color to the garden. And, in most cases, culinary and nutritional value need not be compromised - a factor that may even contribute to that certain *je ne sais quoi* sensual quality...

Brassicas, such as kales and collards, coming in shades ranging from amethyst to emerald, and touted for their Omega 3 properties, are all about foliage and texture. And, like hostas, they last through the season - and beyond. Unlike hostas, deer don't go for them and their flavor and color only get better as cool weather sets in.

While some kales display curled, frilly leaves such as the cultivar, 'Dwarf Blue Curled Vates' or 'Winterbor', others, such as 'Red Russian' offer marvelous plum stems and veins. Collards, with their lovely fuschia/red central vein, are a bit more discrete and are either straight or curly and broad such as 'Blue Surf'. All make an architectural statement.

Sea kale, or *Crambe maritima*, is a true winner. Sporting waxy, glaucous, sea blue and mauve leaves that twist and turn every which way, sea kale stands out when set against boulders or small juniper or cypress shrubs. And, quite unexpectedly, like yuccas, they are faithful perennials even in zone 5.

If one harkens for flowers, *Cynara cardoon* is the candidate. With its carved, angular leaves, topped by thistle-like purple flowerheads that work later as dried flowers, it is positively statuesque. Closely related is the globe artichoke. Reminiscent of our old perennial standby, globe thistle or *Echinops*, (without the 'rub' i.e., the prickles), its silvery leaves are highlighted by its delicate whiskers.

More commercially available and sold after Labor Day for their hardiness, are those popular pink, purple, white and green ornamental kales that resemble cabbages. For me, their rigid shape presents a challenge. Still, as the annual impatiens is dealt its final blow, I will often succumb ... Fortunately, when planted en masse, they are more palatable (but don't eat them!).

And now for some of my very favorites: millet, fennel and Egyptian onion. Tall, each is in its own category and a bit zany. Reaching up to three feet, millet, with its burgundy stem, topped by a 'plume' has the billowy effect of a tall grass. Perfect for the back of a border, it looks even better when contrasted by, say, golden dahlias. For an even softer look, fennel, reminiscent of asparagus foliage, remains unsurpassed for its metallic tones of bronze, copper and rust. Unlike the chunkier Florence fennel however, it is not edible.

For a touch of pizzaz in the garden, consider Egyptian onion. Almost comic in appearance, its contortionist stems, topped by clusters of tiny bulbs, perform like *Pilobolus* dancers. For a more culinary but still attractive allium, try serpent garlic, known for its long, delicate scapes.

Have I almost overlooked capsicums? No surprise. How could I forget that Mexican dish adorned with those cute red peppers I once accidentally sampled in a famous gourmet restaurant in Marfa, Texas? As my mouth was on fire and tears were streaming down my face, a waiter showed up. "Sorry, we use them only for decoration," he said, handing me a glass of milk. Do feel free to enjoy these exotic-looking, green pointed fruits that turn crimson with the sun's rays in a clay pot or a hanging basket where they stand out alone or pared up with a spiky grass. And, should you be driving through west Texas, stop by Marfa to see where the 1956 film "Giant" with James Dean was shot.

When it comes to the horticultural needs of ornamental vegetables, all require sun, good soil and water. Excluding peppers, most tolerate cold

weather, even frost. And, aside from cabbage borers, pests do not usually present a problem.

As in landscape design, the key is combination. Experiment. This should not present a problem since we're talking about relatively dirt cheap annuals that can also be started from seed or by bulb, as in the allium. By mixing them with more traditional stand-bys, they make for a great focal point while offering a touch of the whimsical. Ferruccio Vitale got it right when he threw in a few broccoli with the roses.