

## Unusual Bed Fellows by Honey Sharp

Here's a role reversal for you: flowers in the vegetable garden; vegetables in the flower garden. Think about it as bright petals brushing up against the climbing peas and sculptural leaves against the nepeta.

Sprinkling a few peach nasturtiums on an arugula salad and sautéing golden squash flowers has been around for years. Now, vegetables are finding their way into the ornamental garden.

With creative design and thoughtful planning, edible plants add texture, shape—and colors. They can range from metallic silvers and greens to crimson reds and amethyst purples. The effect is long lasting; the garden will present an elegant face.

It takes a bold step to include an artichoke or a hot pepper plant into the border. Yet, flowering kale in the fall garden is as old-fashioned as pumpkin pie. When the garden is fast disappearing as the days grow shorter and the nights colder, it is tempting to snatch up a few loud fuschia or white flowering kales at the supermarket. Bingo! Like plopping down a few orange or yellow mums, you've got a new garden. Still, flowering kale, that takes its name because it purportedly resembles a rose, has always struck me as too compact, too dense, too ... stiff.

This should not detract however, from the experimental use and pleasure of enjoying edibles in a more traditional garden environment. By introducing one or two and repeating them, the garden takes on a new dimension with eye-catching focal points. It may even assume a whimsical personality. Why not let the garden smile? And, while you're at it, why not eat it when the season winds down?

Still, not all vegetables are appropriate. A typical, more functional vegetable patch or raised bed is one thing. A perennial border is more challenging visually. Even a classical *potager*, with its well-groomed rows of radishes, lettuce, carrots and beets, invites far more choices. (Just don't disturb things by picking...) When sharing a space with flashier cousins such as phlox or rudbeckia, carrots or beets may not prove to be good bed partners.

Ironically, more edible varieties of kale and collards may work better than the typical one used for the fall garden. Recommended for their excellent nutritional value, they also happen to look great when contrasted with other plants. More understated are the tall dark emerald ones. Making a larger splash is the purple stemmed variety, with its

curled and frilly green leaves edged in purple. Complemented by yellow oregano at its base, and cardoon to its side, the effect can be stunning.

For a structural and textural focal point, cardoon is a winner. Architectural in shape, it makes a statement with its carved, angular leaves resembling the foliage of globe thistle but much nicer. It's also less uncomfortable should one brush up against it. With a hint of silver, what better foliage and accent plant could one want? Reaching 24" high and 36" wide, it requires planning however for the appropriate location. Should it look crowded as it comes into its own, it can always be pruned back.

Chard is another intriguing candidate. With bright crimson stalks supporting crinkled red-veined, emerald leaves, the variety known as rhubarb chard makes for an attractive statement. Many varieties exist such as the golden-toned "Bright Lights" and 'Ford Hook Giant', a silver heirloom that reaches up to two feet high.

All of the above tolerate cold weather and even frost. Better yet, the colors intensify as fall temperatures drop. Another reason to use them is that, like grasses, pests do not present a problem. Best of all, they're inexpensive and can be grown from seed. They simply require sun as well as good soil and water.

Like basil and tomatoes, some vegetables are tender and more short-lived. Capsicum peppers are one example. With their exotic green fruits that slowly turn crimson red, they add spice to the garden. Personally, I find they work better in a clay pot especially when pared up with a small spiky grass. Just beware of eating them. As a friend from Baja recently explained, this small pepper is meant to be dried or roasted in oil. Later, that oil can be used for a spicy dish. Just remember to toss out the pepper.

Other candidates for the ornamental garden that are traditionally a food source are millet, fennel and Egyptian onion. Each couldn't be more different. Millet, a grain, has a tall, burgundy stem topped by a "plume". Also tall but quite different in appearance is fennel. Its foliage resembles that of asparagus but comes in shades of bronze, copper and rust. Finally, almost comic in appearance, is the Egyptian onion. Often confused with garlic, it is of the allium family. Its contortionist scapes perform like *Pilobolus* dancers. It is also incredibly easy to plant. By simply dropping a few of the garlic shaped bulbs in the soil in early spring, you will invariably be offered a spectacle by summer.

As in any landscape design, the key is uncovering the right combination. And, of course there is no "right". It is always a creative

process. Offering a bold, often whimsical look to the garden, edible plants carry inherent ornamental value while complementing perennials and shrubs. And, if not appropriate one year, there is always next year.