
HANDS IN THE DIRT

BY E.L. WYVES

EAT YOUR LAWN

Avant-gardeners show that beauty can taste good too.

Lawns are so out.

At least, the ultra-green, chemical-saturated, water-gulping, high-maintenance, monocropped grass kind. Mixing in some clover and vetch is an improvement. Wildflower meadows are even better.

But the true avant-gardener on the East End has abandoned the idea altogether in favor of trellised fava beans, motley beds of cooking greens, medicinal herbs, berries, cold-frames and mini-orchards.

At a recent meeting of the Garden Clubs of America, participants from Long Island were more interested in speaking about sources for vegetable seed than about elaborate patterns of lilies, gladiolas, and tearoses. The new oh-so-cute Kate Spade Hobby Gardening Tote bears the image of not just a fork and spade, but also a carrot. And the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton selected “edible” as the theme for its annual Landscape Pleasures event of garden lectures and tours.

According to home gardeners, landscape architects and garden supply shops, such a shift is motivated not just by a thrifty desire to feed oneself, but also by a newfound sense of beauty.

“Look at how beautiful these spinach leaves are,” said Michael Blake recently, as he peeled the lid off of a coldframe exposing fleshy, viridian plants. (The spinach, kale, and Swiss chard sprouted in late fall and have remained about six inches tall all winter as the owners repeatedly harvested them for winter salads and stir-frys.) Blake is a landscape designer based in Sag Harbor, and more and more of his clients are asking him to plant edible landscapes. “You don’t have to have a flower to be beautiful. A vegetable leaf is as beautiful as a rose.”

Their beauty can be less ephemeral as well. For instance, as blueberries ripen, their weight tends to pull the branches down so the bushes resemble a sort of umbrella with leaf-green cloth and silver-blue ends. By fall, the leaves have morphed to auburn. “If you look at flowers, you’re talking about a short-term pleasure,” said Blake. “You think about it and you go on with your day. But with vegetables, it’s longer lived. It’s sustaining and nurturing. It’s a deeper happiness.”

The garden Mr. Blake conceived for this property, the North Haven residence of architect Fred Stelle and his wife Bettina, includes a wildflower meadow punctuated by patches of strawberries. A serpentine border of raspberries (two colors and five varieties that yield throughout the season) separates the meadow from two long rows of pear and apple trees with beehives at one end. Closer to the house, a series of cold frames and blueberry bushes line the path to the front door. Blake removed several bluestones from the front patio to make room for small islands of edible flowers, herbs and veggies—lettuces



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next to lavenders next to catnip next to impatiens. “They like the idea of being able to harvest from their own property and take from their property,” Blake explained. “The more we got into doing the vegetables, we started mixing edibles with flowers until the vegetables became the dominant aspect.” (The entire five-acre spread is fenced from deer, a must for infested North Haven, but increasingly important for serious gardeners across the East End. Kneehigh fencing is sufficient for rabbits.)

According to Carl Key, CEO of the Long Island Cauliflower Association in Riverhead (a reliable source for seeds and seedlings), many novice veggie growers come looking for information before anything else. “The first thing they’re doing is asking questions,” he said. “What do I need to do before I plant my garden? What are the nutrient needs of the soil? What type of varieties should I be planting?” He’s noted a strong spike in vegetable growing by homeowners in the last few years, which he attributed partly to media coverage of the need for Americans to eat less processed food and more vegeta-

bles. “People like the fact that they can stick their hands in the soil,” he said. “The U.S. was an agrarian country. It’s a piece of Americana and nostalgia.”

This nostalgia also offers landscapers an opportunity to differentiate themselves. Last year, Stephanie Schulte, a garden designer in Sagaponack, planted assorted sunflowers for one client, whose friends liked the effect so much that they became additional clients. This

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spring, she planted lettuces, arugula, and kale in large clay pots in a greenhouse to satisfy her own craving for fresh greens, and a client who glimpsed one liked it so much that it inspired a whole assemblage of pot gardens. Blake will sometimes sprinkle a few lettuce seeds in the flower beds and planters of unsuspecting clients because “I know they’re going to love it.”

“It’s a big leap for people to go from flowers to veggies,” said Eileen Roaman-Catalano, an edible landscaping consultant in Springs, who has designed and maintained large vegetable gardens for seven years. “Which is surprising because everyone eats out and has these big, beautiful kitchens.” Roaman-Catalano recently renovated her 45-foot-by-45 foot vegetable garden, which includes cedar-sided raised beds filled with vegetables, as well as beehives, raspberry bushes, strawberry beds and blueberry rows, and fruit tree whips on two adjacent properties. Potted Meyer lemon trees sit in the wide paths (and spend their winters in the attic), yielding the main ingredients for lemon pasta sauce and lemon cookies. “Pulling some arugula or strawberries from your own garden,” she said with a sigh. “There’s nothing comparable. No farmstand even matches that.”

Roaman-Catalano and her husband Mark were inspired to shift from their perennial herb and flower garden after summer stays in England, where they visited the Gravetye Manor gardens of William Robinson, who helped reintroduce wild and edible gardens into the British landscape in the 19th century. “It was just breathtaking,” she recalled. “And it made sense. I was sitting there worrying about disease on bee balm and I wondered to myself ‘what are you doing?’ What is it with the flowers? We could be eating from our garden. We tore out the gardens and started focusing on veggies.” Today, instead of grass, the couple seeds open spaces and the paths between their fruit trees with a mix of clovers, whose vibrant flowers appeal to both their bees and their eyes.

At Marder’s in Bridgehampton, Charlie Marder has not noticed an increase in sales of fruit trees and berry bushes, although he believes edible gardening offers a sort of gateway to a different approach to landscaping. “If you are using herbicides and insecticides and using that kind of control, you’re not going to be into edibles,” said Marder, whose nursery went completely organic several years ago and who looks forward to wild ramps and dandelion greens each spring. “There’s a conflict there. Because you end up eating what you surround yourself with.”

Such epiphanies fall into what landscape designer Thomas Muse of Sag Harbor-based Muse Design calls conservation medicine, a philosophy that sees human health and the way we treat our environment

as intertwined. In this sense, planting an organic garden or restoring a salt marsh or keeping garbage out of the bays are as important to our well-being as regular exercise and a good night’s sleep. “I like the accountability of the edible in the landscape,” he said. “If you’re going to eat the apple you may not be spraying it. It involves you a little bit more in the natural process, rather than bringing in Dow Chemical.”

Of course, when communities relied more on their own food raising, edible landscaping was a natural and indispensable part of the landscape. But, for Muse, edible landscaping carries a broader meaning. “We’re not the only ones eating here,” he said, referring to those non-human neighbors that share our properties. “I like to talk about our native plants that create food.” Muse points to beach plums and both high- and low-bush blueberries, all natives that yield food for both wildlife and humans. (Muse’s wife, singer and songwriter Nancy Atlas, apparently makes a memorable beach plum jam.) “Beach plums work in hot and dry areas; blueberries like cool and damp,” Muse said. “And they are landscaping-friendly. They flower. They are both very attractive.” (Blueberries can also serve as an alternative to privet. Unlike privet, it produces leaves more consistently at the bottom of the plant and it’s just as likely to keep its leaves in the winter.)

There are practical advantages as well. In contrast to showy flowers, which often need full sunlight, there are veggies that will thrive in all conditions. Sunny spots can be reserved for tomatoes or cukes; shady areas make way for salad or cooking greens. Although perennials berry bushes and fruit trees may take a few seasons to yield substantial crops, they require less work over time. And, just as choosing plants that flower at different times means a steady yield of blooms, planting seeds every few weeks and choosing plants that mature at different times guarantees a steady yield of consumables, since kitchen gardening is most successful when it’s an extension of cooking.

But in general, Blake feels his clients are compelled by a more basic urge. “They say it’s the simple things in life,” he said in an Irish brogue. “To put a seed in the ground, let it germinate and eat it. It’s the most luxurious thing, but also the easiest thing.” □

GARDEN MANTRAS

There’s still time. Most locals consider Memorial Day the proper time to start planting summer crops like tomatoes, squash, beans and corn.

Stagger your plantings. For greens or beans, plant a patch every couple of weeks for a month or so to ensure a steady harvest. If you have patches of lettuces, radishes or other fast-growing crops, you can give this space over to summer crops after you’ve gotten a harvest or two.

Bigger ain’t better. People often don’t want to wait, so they favor large trees, bushes, and other edible plantings. But younger plants establish more easily and can be shaped more easily.

Organic goes mainstream. Most tree care and landscaping companies on the East End will offer organic care regimes, full of compost teas, manuring, and biological pest control. Choosing disease-resistant varieties will also keep pesticide use to a minimum, while ensuring a reliable crop.