

Beauty and Bounty: The Perennial Edible Landscape

By: Karen Mitchell, mitcheka@purdue.edu

A perennial edible garden offers an opportunity to integrate beauty and utility. By incorporating fruit trees, berry bushes, and other long-lived edible plants, the home landscape can be both aesthetically pleasing and agriculturally productive. A perennial edible garden not only provides seasonal harvests but also supports local biodiversity.

Plan(t) for Success

Careful planning and site selection are essential when designing a successful perennial garden, whether edible or ornamental. Because many perennial plants live for a decade or more, evaluating soil conditions and choosing the right location before planting is critical. Most fruiting plants thrive in well-drained soil and require 6 to 8 hours of full sun each day. While a soil pH of 6.0 to 6.5 suits most fruit trees and perennial vegetables, many berries perform best in slightly more acidic conditions, around pH 5.5. Since adjusting soil pH is much easier before planting, early testing and amendment can prevent future challenges. When choosing plant varieties, prioritize those that are cold hardy and offer resistance to common Indiana pests and diseases.

Fruit Trees as Structural Elements

Fruit trees not only yield delicious harvests but also serve as focal points in the landscape. In Indiana, apples, pears, plums, and cherries are popular choices for the landscape, and dwarf varieties can be incorporated into ornamental beds or trained along walls and fences (Fig. 1). While fruit trees are a valuable addition to the edible garden, it's a common misconception that they require little to no maintenance. In reality, even young trees demand attention. Depending on the age of the planting stock, it may take two to four years before fruit production begins. During that time, annual pruning, structural training (Fig. 2), irrigation, and pest management (Fig. 3) are essential to establish healthy, productive trees. Additionally, many fruit trees, especially apples and pears, require cross-pollination and planting two or more compatible varieties is essential for fruit production.



Figure 1. An apple tree trained against a south-facing wall maximizes fruit production in a small space. This technique of training trees to grow flat against a structure or fence is called espalier.



Figure 2. For a pear tree to remain short with an open center, careful trellising and training should be started at planting.



Figure 3. Apple trees without pest management are susceptible to numerous insects and diseases such as sooty blotch, fly speck, apple scab, and leafroller caterpillars.

Berries for Texture and Layers

Berries can create a lush, productive layer along borders or near trees. Depending on the variety, blueberries can range from 2 to 9 feet tall and can serve as a low hedge, an attractive border, or even a striking backdrop within the landscape. Blueberries thrive in acidic soil while Indiana soil is commonly alkaline. Don't guess, soil test (before planting). Raspberries and blackberries grow well throughout the state and benefit from sturdy trellising to keep canes manageable. Strawberries can be used as a groundcover or along edges (Fig. 4). When planned thoughtfully, berries provide sweet treats along with seasonal color and layers in the home landscape.



Figure 4. This strawberry bed serves as a living boundary

separating a greenspace between a garden and open turf.

More Than Just Fruit

Think beyond fruit; several perennial vegetables and herbs can be integrated into the landscape. Asparagus and rhubarb are classic Indiana favorites and offer early spring harvests with minimal maintenance once established. Horseradish typically grows very well in Indiana and should be planted where its vigorous root system and large leaves won't outcompete neighboring plants. Hardy perennial herbs such as chives, oregano, and thyme can be tucked into garden beds or borders for their culinary use, visual appeal, and fragrant aroma.

Commonly Uncommon Fruit

While apples, pears, and berries are familiar sights in Indiana gardens, there are a few fruit trees native to Indiana that add unique flavors to the landscape.

- Pawpaw, or the "Indiana banana," thrives in partial to full sun and the fruit has a creamy texture and tropical flavor.
- American persimmon trees are drought tolerant and produce a sweet, orange fruit in fall.
- Serviceberry is a small tree or large shrub with beautiful blooms and blueberry-like fruit that are highly attractive to pollinators and birds.

Ongoing Care for Long-Term Success

Although perennial edible gardens may eliminate the annual chore of planting, they still require routine care. Annual maintenance needs vary by plant type, but they all benefit from close attention during the first few years during establishment to ensure long-term productivity.

- Mulch to conserve moisture and suppress weeds.
- Prune to improve plant structure and productivity.
- Irrigate deeply and infrequently to encourage a deep root system.
- Fertilize as needed according to soil analysis results and plant needs.
- Monitor and manage pests using an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach.

Additional Resources:

Collecting Soil Samples for Testing (HO-71-W), Purdue Extension: <https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/HO/HO-71-W.pdf>

Managing Pests in Home Fruit Plantings (ID-146-W), Purdue Extension:

<https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/id/id-146-w.pdf>

Purdue Consumer Horticulture – Gardening Bulletins website:

<https://www.purdue.edu/hla/sites/yardandgarden/gardening-bulletins/>

It is the policy of the Purdue University that all persons have equal opportunity and access to its educational programs, services, activities, and facilities without regard to race, religion, color, sex, age, national origin or ancestry, marital status, parental status, sexual orientation, disability or status as a veteran. Purdue is an Affirmative Action Institution. This material may be available in alternative formats. 1-888-EXT-INFO Disclaimer: Reference to products in this publication is not intended to be an endorsement to the exclusion of others which may have similar uses. Any person using products listed in this publication assumes full responsibility for their use in accordance with current directions of the manufacturer.

Purdue Landscape Report © Purdue University - purduelandscape.org