

The edible landscape: an interesting market niche[©]

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INTRODUCTION

With the growing trend to eat local, in-season foods it is no wonder customers are looking to incorporate more edible plants into their landscape design. The trend has sparked the return of edible landscaping—which is all about incorporating edible herbs and flowers as well as plants, trees and shrubs that produce vegetables and fruits—in residential gardens. While the concept is gaining popularity now, edible landscaping is really just as old as gardening. In fact, ancient Persian gardens consisted of a variety of edible and ornamental plants. And medieval gardens took the concept to a whole other level with most gardens housing an array of fruit and vegetable plants, edible flowers and medicinal herbs. Today, with a newfound focus on health, sustainability and environmental protection, edible landscaping is a trend that's here to stay.

An interesting way to expand your market may be to incorporate value-added service to your business plan. If your business includes edibles or “edimentals” as they are sometimes called, you may consider offering edible landscape consultation to your clients. Your service may include design, as well as installation and maintenance with a focus on offering edible annuals, perennials, trees, shrubs, and even ornamental arrangements.

Educate your clients on the benefits of edible landscaping. Edible landscaping can offer benefits to personal health, environmental sustainability, as well as family finances. Eating more fruits and vegetables is the key to better health and growing them in a home landscape is the best—and tastiest—way to get more vitamins and nutrients without preservatives. Additionally, home gardeners can take control of their own chemical use, and may choose to adopt organic practices. Gardeners can access the freshest, most flavorful food without the cost of shipping great distances and the loss of flavor that results from premature harvest for supermarket shelves. Planting edible gardens also gives consumers the opportunity to plant and grow foods that aren't always available in your local supermarket.

It's important to present your client with plenty of ideas for incorporating edibles into their existing landscape. For every type of plant commonly found in a “traditional” landscape, there is an edible alternative.

TREES

Citrus

Since citrus trees are particularly sensitive to cold temperatures, they are not well-suited for most home landscapes. The kumquat (*C. japonica*), calamondin (*C. japonica*), and satsuma (*C. reticulata*) have the greatest degree of cold hardiness. However, most gardeners can successfully enjoy citrus trees in patio containers. Any type of citrus tree can be grown in a container, but navel oranges, grapefruit (*Citrus × paradisi*), and most other oranges are very vigorous and outgrow all but very large containers.

Naturally small citrus cultivars such as 'Improved' lemon (*C. × meyeri* 'Improved'), satsumas, kumquats, and calamodins are easy to grow in containers. If you can purchase citrus that is grafted onto *C. trifoliata* 'Flying Dragon' rootstock, it will be significantly dwarfed, which will extend its life in a container. Following are some recommended taxa (Porter, 2013):

- 'Owari' satsuma (*C. reticulata* 'Owari') was introduced from Japan and is the most widely available satsuma. The fruit is seedless and matures from October to mid-November. 'Owari' trees tend to be more vigorous than other satsumas.
- 'Nagami' kumquats (*C. japonica* 'Nagami') produce oblong fruit with a smooth rind,

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deep orange color, and acid juice. They ripen from mid-October through February. The fruit is one and a half to two inches long and one to two inches in diameter and contains seeds. The 'Nagami' tree is vigorous, with a round, bushy top. It is very cold hardy.

- *Citrus × meyeri* or *C. × meyeri* 'Improved' are the only lemons recommended for container culture due to their small degree of cold hardiness. It is not a true lemon, but a cross between a lemon and an orange. It ripens in mid-October and holds on the tree until December or longer. *Citrus × meyeri* is better when grown from a rooted cutting than when grafted. It has a strong tendency to bloom and set fruit throughout the year.

Fig

Ficus carica is a native of Asia and was imported into the United States in the 16th century. The fruit is tasty and can be eaten fresh, made into preserves and jams, or used in baking. Figs have the potential to produce an early crop, called the breba crop, on last year's wood in the spring, a main crop on the current-season wood during the summer, and a third crop in the fall. These different crop productions vary from one cultivar to another. Popular fig varieties include 'Celeste', 'LSU Purple', 'LSU Gold', and 'Brown Turkey' (Gill et al., 2011).

- 'Celeste' produces small- to medium-size fruit that is resistant to splitting and souring. The fruit is violet to brown with a light strawberry-colored pulp.
- 'LSU Purple' has medium-size, dark purple fruit and good resistance to foliage diseases. Its tendency to produce three distinct crops—a light crop in early spring, a heavy main crop in early July and a later crop sometimes lasting into December—makes it popular.
- 'LSU Gold' is a relatively new yellow-fruited variety that may still be hard to find, but it is well worth growing. The 'LSU Purple' and 'LSU Gold' cultivars were developed from crosses made by Ed O'Rourke in the 1950s.

Fig trees need room. They can reach heights of 10-15 ft with an equal spread. Plant them in a sunny location away from large trees with overhanging branches. Figs will not produce well unless they receive at least 6 h of direct sun daily.

SHRUBS

Blueberries

Blueberries are increasingly popular fruits with well-documented health benefits. Blueberry plants are also exceptionally handsome bushes worthy of planting in the home landscape. The fruit can be eaten fresh, or frozen for out-of-season use. Plants have a profusion of white blossoms in late spring, and the leaves are glossy green in summer and have outstanding red foliage in autumn. Blueberry production may present a challenge for some gardeners because the plants need special growing conditions. They require acidic, well-drained soils (Hoover et al., 2009).

There are three main types of cultivated blueberries that can be grown in the Southeast: rabbiteye, northern highbush, and Southern highbush. This section focuses on the rabbiteye and southern highbush types (Polomski and Reighard, 1999).

In general, rabbiteyes (*Vaccinium ashei*) are the most adaptable, productive, and pest-tolerant of the three types of blueberries. In general, rabbiteye blueberries have some degree of self-incompatibility; therefore, a minimum of two cultivars are required for cross-pollination to ensure maximum fruit. Some recommended rabbiteye cultivars include:

- Early season: 'Beckyblue', 'Bonita', 'Brightwell', 'Climax', 'Premier', 'Woodard'
- Midseason: 'Bluebelle', 'Briteblue', 'Chaucer', 'Powderblue', 'Tifblue'
- Late season: 'Baldwin', 'Centurion', 'Choice', 'Delite'

'Woodard' is a good berry for fresh-eating but develops a tough skin when frozen. 'Tifblue', 'Powderblue', 'Brightwell', 'Briteblue' and 'Centurion' are most resistant to spring freezes.

Southern highbush blueberries are hybrids derived from crosses between northern

highbush blueberries and native southern species, mainly Darrow's evergreen blueberry (*V. darrowi*). Southern highbush cultivars, in addition to lower chilling requirements, also have greater tolerance to high summer temperatures, somewhat greater drought tolerance and develop superior fruit quality under southern growing conditions. As a rule, southern highbush blueberries are self-fertile. However, larger and earlier-ripening berries result if several cultivars are interplanted for cross-pollination. The following Southern highbush blueberries are recommended for the garden and landscape:

- Very early season: 'O'Neal'
- Early/midseason: 'Cape Fear'
- Midseason: 'Blue Ridge' and 'Georgia Gem'
- Mid/late season: 'Legacy' and 'Summit'
- Late season: 'Ozarkblue'

Pineapple guava

Acca sellowiana (feijoa) is an attractive evergreen shrub bearing delicious fruits with an unusual, refreshing pineapple-mint flavor. The leaves are soft green on top, silvery underneath. One inch wide white petal flowers have showy red centers reminiscent of fuchsia flowers. These plants are low maintenance with few insects or diseases. Ideal for containers, feijoa also looks excellent in the landscape and makes a beautiful hedge. Two different plants (not the same clone) are required to insure pollination and fruit set.

Aronia arbutifolia

Aronia is commonly known as chokeberry. 'Brilliantissima' is commonly grown by the nursery industry, probably more so than the species. It possesses enhancements to all the desirable features of the species. It blooms and fruits heavily; has larger fruit than the species; produces very glossy, dark-green foliage; and dependable, intense red fall color. Most experts roundly praise this cultivar, and it may serve as a fine native substitute for the invasive, exotic *Euonymus alata* (burning bush).

FLOWERS

Violets and violas

Violets (*Viola*) are adapted to woods and pasture. The purple flowers are edible and the plant is medicinal. Make sure your spring salads include violets. Grows exceedingly well in hard bark mulch as a companion with bush fruits such as blueberries.

Roses

Rose hips are the large seed pods that form on rose canes after blossom. Some roses, especially *Rosa rugosa*, form rose hips that are as big as crab apples—about the size of a quarter! And, in the fall they turn brilliant colors of red and orange, and sometimes even purple.

And, being a true member of the apple family, rose hips are edible. Rose hips are also very high in vitamin C, and you'll often see them listed as the main source for vitamin C in many commercially available vitamins. You can also eat rose petals. Sprinkle them on salads, use them as garnish, or make them into wonderful rose-petal jelly.

GROUNDCOVERS

Mint

Corsican mint (*Mentha requienii*) is a dynamic ground cover and ornamental mint if you can give it lots of moisture. It takes some abuse from being trod on and comes back just fine. If you have a low spot in the garden with a few neglected looking pavers surrounded by bare dirt, Corsican mint may be the solution to your problem. Corsican mint prefers sandy soil and dappled light. It should never be allowed to dry out.

Rosemary

Rosmarinus officinalis (syn. *R. prostrates*) is a creeping rosemary type that has made a name for itself as a container rosemary. It is an evergreen ground cover, but also looks natural in containers, hanging baskets and easily wraps around circular wire frames to create topiaries. Creeping rosemary is a tender evergreen perennial with fragrant evergreen foliage and pale blue summer flowers.

FOLIAGE

Basil

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) is an easy to grow and easy to use herb. It grows well in pots and in beds. There are many types to choose from:

- Thai basil (*O. basilicum* var. *thyrsoflora*). Characterized by its strong licorice fragrance and flavor, this annual is also referred to as anise or licorice basil. It reaches heights up to 24 in. and with a nearly 2-ft expanse. Thai basil is more easily found in specialty grocery stores that carry exotic or high-end fresh herbs, but is easy to propagate.
- Genovese basil (*O. basilicum* 'Genovese Gigante'). A well-regarded favorite among foodies, Genovese basil is considered the best basil for use in Italian recipes (pesto, tomato-basil sauce, Caprese salad, etc.) Like sweet basil, this annual has a strong clove fragrance and ranges from 12 to 24 in. in height, but is easily distinguished by its more crinkly and in-turned leaves.
- Lemon basil (*O. × citriodorum*). Similar to the other basil, this annual grows to a height of about 2 ft, but exudes a savory lemon flavor and fragrance. This basil is a bit spindlier than its other basil relatives and is characterized by a flatter, narrower leaf.
- Cinnamon basil (*O. basilicum* 'Cinnamon'). The name describes it all—basil with a cinnamon flavor. Its strong cinnamon scent easily distinguishes it from other basil. It also has a somewhat harrier leaf. This medium-sized annual grows up to 2½ ft tall and produces pale pink to purple flowers.
- 'Siam Queen'. *Ocimum basilicum* var. *thyrsoflorum* 'Siam Queen' is a type of Thai basil that produces mint green leaves with very large flower heads—up to 6 in. across—that give off a spicy anise scent. It reaches heights up to 2½ ft, but it can be pinched back to restrict growth.
- 'Purple Ruffles' (*O. basilicum* 'Purpurescens'). This is a great plant to spice up the kitchen and the landscape! It is perhaps the most colorful basil for landscapes. Similar in color to 'Dark Opal', this plant is slightly smaller in stature (reaches up to 1½ ft) and its leaves are very frilly and ruffled. While it can handle a shadier spot in the garden, it still needs at least three hours of sunlight to mature properly. 'Purple Ruffles' gives off a combination of licorice and cinnamon scents and produces lavender and pink flowers that can also be eaten. Somewhat difficult to start from seeds, this plant works best from transplants.

Lemongrass

Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*), is an instant tea plant; just a few leaves in a cup of hot water yield a lemony drink. A tropical ornamental grass, it will take over an outdoor bed and will even grow well indoors. It is also known as a source for citral, the essential oil responsible for citronella's lemony scent. Lemongrass comes in two main varieties: East Indian and West Indian. They have subtle differences but are grown under the same conditions. Lemongrass is a perennial in growing Zones 10 and warmer but can be grown as an annual in cooler climates, though it may be difficult to grow outside in Zones 8 and colder. In general, plant lemongrass after the danger of frost has passed, in late spring for a late summer harvest. Lemongrass takes at least 100 days and sometimes up to 4-8 months to be ready for harvest.

CONCLUSIONS

Ensure the success of your customer's landscape by following up. By becoming a resource for your clients, they will return to your business for advice and additional plant material. Word of mouth referrals are invaluable!

Edible landscaping enhances the environment, is beneficial to our health and our wallets. It is a sustainable practice and by growing our own food we enhance our access to local food and decrease our carbon footprint.

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