

Landscaping for today

Backyard stewardship, food production and ecological generation



Blueberries are a popular plant in edible landscaping. Krista Slavik photo

▣ BY BENJAMIN PORTWOOD ▣

Edible and ecological landscaping is a trend that is sweeping the nation.

It combines aspects of many different types of gardens – rain gardens, ornamentals, fruits, berries, culinary herbs, butterfly gardens, cut flowers, and vegetable gardens – in a beautiful, interactive landscape, that is low maintenance, resilient in both drought and flood, produces food and herbs, and helps support local ecosystems, all at the same time.

The key is to foster connections in the yard. Good connections between plants, living soil fertility, pollinators and songbirds, increase the health and vigor of the plants growing in your yard. Choosing plants that produce food or scent

as well as beauty creates connections between humans and the landscape, and that connection ultimately helps us become responsible stewards of the land.

Rainwater harvesting

The recent rainy years have not erased the memory of the severe droughts in the last five years. Cisterns are a great way to capture rainwater for use in annual vegetable gardens or to wash your car, but rain gardens are the least expensive way to make your landscape water-resilient in both drought and times of flood.

Rain gardens store water in the soil for use by bushes and trees. They are concave areas built into your yard, which fill with water

directed to them from downspouts or the overflow of a cistern. It can be one basin, or a series that fills sequentially, with the overflow from one moving to the next. The water in each basin slowly seeps into the ground, creating a moist plume of water going downwards. Trees and bushes can “stick a root in” to access the water, but much of it will help to recharge ground water, or even create a spring further down a slope. Rain gardens are the easiest way to passively irrigate your landscape, making it resistant to both drought and floods.

Edible landscaping

Incorporating perennial food-producing plants is one of the best investments that you can make in

a landscape. Planting perennials, which live for many years, is the easiest way to have an abundant garden because the plants do most of the work.

There are many examples of food plants that are beautiful and hardy (low-maintenance) and can be integrated into an edible landscape. Fruit trees like disease-resistant apples, pears, cherries, figs, asian pears, persimmons, pawpaws, plums and pomegranates are high on the list, as are walnuts, chestnuts, and hazelnuts.

There are a surprising number of perennial vegetables, as well. The most obvious ones are asparagus and rhubarb. We can add to that list sorrel, sochan, anise-hyssop, redbud flowers, chicory, fennel, horseradish, nettles, chives, lovage



Muscadine vine growing along a wall. (above) Rainwater harvesting is important component in landscaping. Benjamin Portwood photos



and daylily. The trick is to arrange all of these plants in your yard in a way that is aesthetically pleasing.

A mature edible and ecological landscape has a transcendent quality of abundance and life. It is a combination of enough water, a good, living soil with plenty of organic material, populated by lush, living plants to both enrich the soil and make beautiful flowers that attract butterflies and other beneficial insects. A garden like this is a joy to experience and is the smartest way to sustainably manage your landscape.

Benjamin Portwood is a founder of Edible Yard & Garden, which operates in Asheville and Atlanta. He received training at the Montsant Permaculture Institute in Catalunya, Spain, where he spent two years in an apprenticeship program learning how to use plants to develop ecologies and produce food. He has been designing and installing rainwater-harvesting systems, and edible and ecological landscapes since 2008.

Along with Edible Yard and Garden, he is currently developing a 17-acre sustainable farm in Barnardsville. He derives great joy from designing garden beds and planting trees. www.edibleyardandgarden.com or 404.825.0139.

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