

FOOD for thought

Lockdown seemingly sparked an interest in Brits to grow their own fruit and veg, but is there more behind this surge than being stuck at home? And how can the landscaping industry help clients to incorporate edible gardening into their outdoor spaces?



Lockdown was difficult, but there were arguably some silver linings, the widely reported increase in gardening for one. But people seemingly weren't just growing plants to please the eye. In 2020, 7.4 million Brits tried growing their own fruit, vegetables and herbs for the first time throughout the pandemic, according to organic beauty brand Weleda.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the landscaping industry has reported a rise in clients requesting edible planting in their gardens. So, what's behind the demand? And how can edible gardening be incorporated into both large schemes and small domestic spaces?

"There has been an upsurge of interest in edible gardens since lockdown, as people spent more time in their gardens. This has

coincided with a greater awareness of the threat of climate change and the need for everybody to play their part in adopting a more sustainable approach to everyday life, including cutting down on food miles," says James Scott, managing director of The Garden Company.

"People are becoming so much more aware of the link between good food, health, nutrition and wellbeing, and biodiversity loss, soil degradation and climate change," adds Charlotte Harris and Hugo Bugg of Harris Bugg Studio, the company behind the new Kitchen Garden at RHS Garden Bridgewater. "Growing edibles is an easy, accessible way to make that first step and doesn't need to be more than pots on a terrace if that's how you'd like to start."

Related to this increase in sustainable living is the rise of veganism, which garden

designer Ann-Marie Powell says is also driving an interest in people growing their own food. "It's no surprise to me that youngsters are wanting their own new food stories because it supports their lifestyle and what they really care about. Allotmenting and growing your own is no longer the hippie or grandad pastime that it once was; it's for everybody. And the rise of veganism over the last few years has been amazing."

More recently, rising food prices could be tempting people to try alternatives. Brits have seen supermarket food prices soar to the highest levels since the 2008 financial crisis, according to the British Retail Consortium (BRC) and market research firm Nielsen IQ. A combination of the war in Ukraine and summer droughts led to a 5.7% hike in food prices in September, up from 5.1% the previous month. ▶

“The demand for organic food is growing exponentially and the cost-of-living crisis is making people consider growing their own organic food whilst simultaneously benefitting from getting their hands into the soil and knowing that they are feeding their family with truly healthy organic food,” says Tony Brophy of Gaia Gardeners whose project ‘Frank’s Garden’, which included an edible garden, won Pro Landscaper’s small project BIG IMPACT Award 2021 for Sustainable Garden of the Year. “Once people have grown their own and tasted the difference between bland, homogenous supermarket alternatives they never look back.”

Though growing your own produce doesn’t always cut costs. “Edible gardening is not necessarily a money-saver. There are likely to be some fixed costs at the start

when setting up, and then some ongoing costs too,” says James. “However, if you consider the non-financial benefits – including sustainability, enjoyment, freshness and flavour – it is easy to see why edible gardening is on the increase. And some specific crops are definitely cheaper when home-grown rather than relying on supermarket supplies. These include fresh herbs and salad leaves, both of which can be eye-wateringly expensive in the fruit and veg aisles.”

Even with lockdowns (hopefully) now long behind us, ‘grow your own’ remains popular, “even if it has fallen back somewhat from lockdown heights,” says RHS chief horticulturist Guy Barter, who adds that the RHS web pages continue to be “much visited”. This is helping

gardeners across the UK – and further afield – to take up edible gardening.

“Use of edible plants in ornamental areas – front gardens, for example – or making edible gardens attractive in their own right, as with permaculture, has increased in importance as gardeners cope with shortages of space to garden and seek gardens that contribute more to the quest for sustainability – using fruiting or nut trees instead of purely ornamental ones for example.

“The RHS encourages this by advising on how to grow edible plants, how to grow them in pots for example and helping source plants that have potential for ornamental and edible usage. RHS gardens now include areas of their edible gardens as more integrated plantings and also using a wider range of plants of global importance such as sharks fin melons and yams. Traditional more utilitarian plots and orchards remain but we manage these along sustainable lines to enhance soil health and promote ecological services that these gardens can provide.”

Take the Kitchen Garden at RHS Bridgewater, which has four planting zones: a forest garden, an herbal garden, a formal vegetable garden, surrounded by wall-trained fruit against/around the walls of the garden. The core hope, say Charlotte and Hugo, was for visitors to take inspiration from this 11-acre walled garden for their own gardens, regardless of size.

“The brief from the RHS was to create an accessible, approachable and inclusive kitchen garden to engage and inspire new audiences, based on ‘Everyone can grow’ principles. In response we designed a relevant, varied and experimental productive garden that has rich resource for all levels of experience and home space.

“The garden has a range of different ways to grow edibles – traditional raised beds, a food forest, wall trained fruit and more. It also features a modern apothecary garden channelling the Victorian utilitarian spirit of productive gardens and showcasing plants for teas, tinctures, dyes, medicine, perfume and beauty. We hope that Bridgewater’s kitchen garden acts as a gateway – a place for inspiration, experimentation and, dare we say it, failure! We purposefully wanted it to be a place that is realistic, relatable and relevant.

“Even though the footprint is just under two acres, we have examples of edibles in pots, in ponds, growing up structures, being

trained along the walls. We wanted it to be as relevant for a windowsill in Wilmslow, a balcony in Bolton or a family garden in Goole. The beds are designed using the abstracted field networks of the area in the Victorian period, but what this means is that the bed sizes are unusual shapes and sizes – much like our own gardens.”

The RHS isn’t the only one incorporating edible spaces into its gardens. The National Trust has more than 60 kitchen gardens across its estates, says Steve Candy, head gardener at Kingston Lacy, which has recently started the phased restoration of its Victorian kitchen garden. Owned previously by generations of the Bankes family, the kitchen garden was a vital aspect of the estate in Dorset. It would supply the house on site and the family’s other houses, as well as supplying huge amounts for the local market, says Steve.

Kitchen gardens remain incredibly important across the National Trust too for the impact they have on visitors. “They are not only historic, but they also showcase what people can do in their

own garden. So as much as we tend to be doing it on a much larger scale – our kitchen garden here will be six acres in size – you can do it in the size of a postage stamp. There are always opportunities to be able to grow your own fruit and veg, whether it be some potatoes or runner beans, and incorporate it into your own garden as well. So, it’s really exciting for us to be able to show what we can do, but also so that people can take it away and utilise it in their own spaces.” It’s important to start small when incorporating edible planting into a domestic garden, using just couple of varieties, says Steve. “I would start by using pots or raised beds; it’s the simplest way to actually start learning how to grow things. It’s all about experimentation.”

Clients can then start to expand their plots, depending on the space available. Steve suggests fruit trees espaliered up a wall to save space, or incorporating edible planting into mixed borders, something which Charlotte and Hugo say they are being asked for. Most clients are asking for at least herbs, they say; but people are increasingly interested in how productive plants can be weaved through ornamental planting too.

Ann-Marie, who designed The World Food Garden ▶

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Charlotte Harris and Hugo Bugg, Harris Bugg Studio



What should you consider for IMPLEMENTING EDIBLE PLANTS INTO DOMESTIC GARDENS?

James Scott of The Garden Company shares the top things to take into account

SPACE AVAILABLE

An edible garden can be as small as a single container or as large as the space allows, complete with rows of raised beds, fruit trees and berry bushes.

POSITION

A sunny position is ideal, but many edible plants will also grow well in partial shade. Access to a water supply is important too.

AESTHETICS

As a designer, it is important to consider how the edible garden space will be integrated with ornamental parts of the garden.

SOIL TYPE

Well-draining soil that is rich and moist, with neutral acidity is ideal for most fruit and vegetable growing.

BUDGET FOR ADDITIONAL FEATURES

A garden shed, greenhouse or potting bench can all play a useful part. Of course, if the client has the space and budget, a greenhouse provides plants with a safe haven protected from extreme weather and insects.

PREFERENCE AND PERSONAL TASTE

What does the client want to eat (especially considering that they may have a large supply).



Revitalising the KINGSTON LACY KITCHEN GARDEN

Work has begun on bringing the Victorian Kitchen Garden at the Kingston Lacy estate in Dorset back to life. The gardening team will be rejuvenating what was once a flourishing and vital part of the garden for the Bankes’ family, which owned Kingston Lacy for generations.

The National Trust took over the estate in the early 1980s, but with a limited workforce and a vast amount of restoration needed across the grounds, it decided to let the site of the kitchen garden on a long-term lease. When it came back into its hands just over a decade ago, the National Trust decided to add 120 allotments onto the site.

“We worked with local community groups, schools and individuals to start to tell the story to our visitors of what the Bankes family might have been doing all those years ago,” explains head gardener, Steve Candy. “We built up a strong community feeling across the whole site and started to then restore other areas that needed our attention in the kitchen garden.”

Since, the allotments have been located to a neighbouring field with a continued community feel with the Kingston Lacy site, and the years-long restoration of the Bankes’ kitchen garden has commenced. Separated into four stages, the first was to reinstall the former path and hedge network. Then a shrub and tree boundary was to be planted around the perimeter for the second phase, followed by the restoration of the wrought iron gates and ornamental fencing. The final phase is replanting the former apple orchards and recreating the apple archway which spans the width of the garden.

at RHS Garden Wisley (read more about this on page 71), says edibles are attractive plants, and there are plenty of perennial crops to grow in pots or mixed in with perennial borders. Ann-Marie herself has blueberries, strawberries and redcurrants mixed in with her dahlias.

“We’ve done that quite a lot for clients in the past, with things like artichokes, cabbages and kale. They offer a lot of texture to plantings and also visual rest where your eye can alight on them between all the glory of beautiful herbaceous flowers and blooms. If you’re growing edibles mixed in with your perennial borders, for example, there’s lots of winter crops that can replace your annual crops in your borders, so you never end up with gaps.

“And these days, you don’t have to grow from seed either; there are so many different companies offering seedlings of vegetables, so you don’t have to worry about how you’re going to grow things on without a greenhouse.”

There are a few things to consider when adding kitchen gardens, or any form of edible planting, to a client’s garden. The first question Ann-Marie asks is: How much time have you got? “We have a duty of care not to put in something that’s really complex... We’ll often put in something that could be extended or think about mixing in edibles with other planting.”

Then there’s successional planting that will allow you to keep cropping throughout the year, even in the winter, says Ann-Marie.

Soil health is king though, she adds. Gaia Gardeners is a certified ‘Master Organic Gardener’ from Gaia College, and Tony says the company’s primary focus is on the quality of the soil,

“building up the soil organic matter with good composting techniques and increasing the microbial activity in the soil.

“Most soils in southern England have less than 2% organic matter, but in the rest of the British Isles 2-6% may be found. At Gaia Gardeners we aim to manage the levels of soil organic matter to get acceptable plant growth, which will typically mean that organic matter levels should be close to 6%.”

It is also important, adds Tony, that the client grows what they like to eat and is advised on the best available varieties.

“We recommend growing edible flowers along with edible plants and vegetables and direct clients to Sarah Raven’s excellent website which contains a lot of useful information and a range of really interesting edible flowers and plants. We recommend harvesting just half the herbs, then let the rest go to bloom, which attracts pollinators that are beneficial to the garden. Many herbs such as sage, dill, parsley and rosemary are beautiful, fragrant additions to cut bouquets, combined with other more traditional garden flowers.”

For those without access to their own gardens, there are a variety of community growing projects which incorporate edible gardening. “Some of the most fascinating and inspiring edible landscapes are made by the many community groups that we work with who plant community

orchards and food gardens, sometimes in conjunction with local parks,” says Guy. “The RHS Campaign for School Gardening also promotes growing edible plants to children, teachers and parents.”

Tony highlights Nantes in France, where the parks department has added ‘Gourmet Stations’ to many of its public open spaces, when visitors can pick their own fruit, vegetables and herbs.

“Each of these ‘Gourmet Stations’ is planted, tended and run by inhabitants’ associations and groups. Edible landscaping is a concept that all the 339 local authorities in

England should be considering and following the ‘best practice’ example of Nantes,” says Tony.

There are a few considerations, though, to ensure that kitchen gardens being introduced, whether in public or private spaces, are sustainable. Talking about the Kitchen Garden at Bridgewater, Charlotte and Hugo say:

“The forest garden is strongly influenced by permaculture principles,

which seek to emulate natural woodland ecosystems as closely as possible. Once established, it continues to produce food but requires little or no artificial energy input, no chemical fertiliser or pesticides, and minimal labour, all of which mean lower negative environmental impacts. As the trees grow the soil locks up increasing carbon, just like a natural forest system.

“We also thought carefully about how to attract beneficial insects and other wildlife into the garden. For example, three long water tanks and a natural pool encourage wildlife, as does a richly pollinator-friendly planting approach right across the garden. The traditional planting areas with raised beds are being cultivated with no dig principles.”

So, regardless of the size of the client’s garden, and the time that the client has to spend in it, there are plenty of options for incorporating edible gardening into a project – and with a recent boom in ‘grow your own’ interest, now is arguably the best time to suggest it.

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