





# SUGAR SNAPS & STRAWBERRIES

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Simple Solutions for Creating  
Your Own Small-Space Edible Garden



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WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY Jackie Connelly

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To my daughter, Lila,  
and future gardeners everywhere.

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# PREFACE

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*All around us, a movement is taking place.* People are rigging up window boxes for growing herbs, making room on the fire escape for a pot of tomatoes, renovating neglected flowerbeds to make way for raspberries and rhubarb, and convincing landlords to turn over a few square feet of lawn for food production. Families are joining waitlists for community garden plots, signing up for canning workshops, and getting to know their local growers at the farmer's market.

The economy, self-sufficiency, sustainability, taste, health—whatever your reasons, it is always a good time to grow your own organic food. And you can do it, no matter how small your gardening space.

I grow food for all these reasons, but most of all I do it because it feels great. I love working outside and getting my hands dirty. I love connecting with other gardeners and sharing seeds and ideas. And I love harvesting something I have grown and eating it fresh that night for dinner. Yes, it is local food—really local food. But mainly it's just good food.

For me, gardening has been a lifelong obsession and an experiment in trial and error. Lots of error. And, believe it or not, that is something I love about growing food—it keeps me on my toes. Just when I think I've finally mastered this urban farming thing, nature proves me wrong. The key, I think, is to pay attention—to celebrate each perfect potato, learn from mistakes, and, above all, enjoy the process.

This book walks you through the basics—and then some—of planning, creating, and tending an organic food garden in a small space. This is the book I wish I had when I was a new gardener, and I hope it will be a helpful resource and an inspiration to you. Most of all, I hope you get hooked on gardening and growing your own good food.







# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# 1 GARDEN STYLE

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*Not all that long ago, vegetable gardens were relegated to the backyard. Tucked away from the eyes of neighbors and visitors, the veggie patch was often plain and utilitarian. It served one function: to feed the family.*

Now, edibles are everywhere—even on the grounds of the White House. And not only gardeners are doing the growing. Foodies are discovering the beauty of cooking with homegrown produce and herbs. Self-sufficient types are learning how to feed themselves—from seed to plate. And we are all trying to lighten our carbon footprint and save money by eating closer to home. Finally, the veggie patch is having its day.



There is beauty in a garden, no matter how simple or how small.

*Few of us have a spare 200 square feet in which to hide a vegetable garden. In a small space—be it a balcony, a patio, a plot in a community garden, or even a small yard—everything is right there in front of you. So forget about segregating your edibles—celebrate them! Put your veggie patch on display. You're living with it—and, in summer, practically in it—so you may as well design your edible garden to be beautiful as well as functional.*

You might be entering the food-growing game for reasons not too different from those of your grandparents. You might just want a basic, yet productive, vegetable patch from which to supplement your meals. But even a no-frills approach to food gardening can be attractive. It starts with a bit of dreaming and planning, which is what this chapter is all about.

## FINDING YOUR PERSONAL STYLE

Deciding how you want your garden to look can be a difficult task. You might find yourself drawing blank—or having many differing visions of your personal paradise.

Take a moment to disregard the reality of your space. Forget its limitations. Let your mind wander and think about your dream garden. What do you imagine? It could be the charming, formal kitchen garden at a bed and breakfast you visited in France. It could be your grandfather's sun-drenched veggie patch behind the old house, or the casual luxury of the penthouse suite deck you can see from your balcony.

Finding and embracing these inspirations will set the theme, or mood, of your garden. And although you might not be able to duplicate your dream garden at home, you can use its characteristics to influence your garden design.

You may not have room for a traditional potager, for example, but you can incorporate touches of this time-honored French kitchen garden design into any space. Choose weathered terracotta or metal planters, planting one with boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*), the evergreen shrub traditionally used to hedge in a potager, to provide structure and year-round greenery. Your choice of plants (attractive edibles combined with ornamental flowering plants) and structure (formal and geometrical rather than informal and asymmetrical) will all hint at the theme of your garden space.

An obvious theme for your garden isn't necessary, of course. But keeping that one overarching idea—your dream garden—in mind will help you stay on track as you choose containers and make other design decisions.

### *You can find inspiration in many places.*

- **Your home.** The mood of a favorite room can be re-created in your outdoor space.
- **Your travels.** A favorite vacation spot can be your muse.
- **Your neighbors' gardens.** Peek over fences and check out what's growing in your neighbors' backyards to get clues about what plants grow well in your area.
- **Memory.** The gardens of childhood often leave lasting impressions; perhaps you can re-create a favorite in your own space.
- **Local garden centers and botanical gardens.** These organizations often have drool-inducing displays and ideas you can borrow.

Also check out garden books and magazines; garden, home design, and style blogs; and online photo galleries such as Flickr. Inspiration is everywhere.



Red cabbage takes center stage in a mixed ornamental and edible border.

*Potager* is a French term for an ornamental vegetable garden. This traditional, intensive design often combines herbs and flowers with attractive vegetables in geometric patterns and beds.

Accessorizing your outdoor space makes it feel personal and welcoming. Lanterns in an apple tree help set the mood in this garden.



Look for beauty and inspiration in everyday objects.

If you like wildly different design styles and can't decide on one, this chapter describes the differences between formal and informal garden styles to help you determine whether you prefer one over the other. This can be a starting point for your design. Or borrow a technique used by interior decorators, fashion designers, and creative types from all fields and create a mood board—a collection of images, objects, text, and textures that provide a visual illustration of your garden ideas. Collect images and objects that inspire you and arrange them on poster board, in a notebook, or online. Start big, choosing a lot of images, and then weed out the pieces that don't fit in. This will help clarify your style preference and provide direction for a clear final vision.

### ***Designing for small spaces***

Designing a small garden comes down to a lot of tough choices. Rarely is there room for everything you want to include in your space, so you have to do a bit of soul searching to make decisions about what is really important. Do you want to make a dedicated effort to grow as much of your own produce as possible? Or do you want to grow only a few herbs to support your cooking habit? What else needs to be able to happen in your growing space—besides growing? Would you sacrifice a barbecue for a couple of blueberry bushes? The desired scale of food production will have a huge impact on how your garden will look.

For me, gardening is a balancing act. I aim to grow as much food as I can in my small space, while

still allowing room for things other than plants—a barbecue, a place to eat, even a corner where my daughter can splash in a wading pool. Style-wise, I am a contradiction, loving the clean, modern lines of minimalism, yet coveting the sensory overload of an abundant veggie plot. I am lucky because I have both a balcony and a community garden plot, and therein lies my personal solution: keep it neat and restrained at home, and go wild in the allotment.



Gardeners must balance multiple demands in a small outdoor space. Through careful planning, this gardener produces a lot of food on a modest patio and still has space to relax.

As much as I sometimes covet a big backyard, I know that some blessings come with a small garden. A small garden forces you to be organized, because you have no place to hide junk or plants and containers that you don't really like. (And you'll like your garden more after you have edited it.) The best thing about a small garden is that it is manageable. No need to spend hours fussing over, well, anything—unless you want to. Gardens can take a lot of work, so it can be best to start small no matter how big your garden space. Forget the yard envy, and focus all your efforts on making your little space as beautiful and as productive as possible.

## **A QUICK GARDEN DESIGN LESSON**

In designer-speak, gardens can usually be divided into two types: formal and informal. Of course, some combine the best of both.

Get familiar with a few of the basic principles behind these styles, because this can help you identify common elements in the types of gardens you find appealing. And understanding the key characteristics of gardens you love will help you to create something just as beautiful in your own space.

### ***Formal garden designs***

Formal garden designs emphasize order, symmetry, and geometry. But even if you think of yourself as a casual, rule-bending personality type, don't dismiss formality entirely. Vegetable gardens are traditionally laid out with straight rows and rectangular plots for a reason.

Humans are predisposed to finding appeal in the repetitive harmony of a formal design. Pattern is pleasing—whether it is introduced through a series of perfectly aligned raised beds, in fruit trees in identical containers marking the four corners of a patio, or in a variety of red and green lettuces grown in patchwork squares.

Formal designs also tend to work well with urban architecture—from the geometry of a city skyline to the straight lines of your own home.

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Grains such as wheat and buckwheat add interest and movement in an informal edible garden.



This garden's design is asymmetrical, yet it feels orderly; some of the best garden designs are successful because they blend formal and informal elements.





The upright leaf form of alliums such as leeks provide good contrast to lower growing edibles with rounded or oblong leaves.

Finally, formal gardens tend to hold their shape—and their interest—year-round. Even when your crops are buried under snow, the rhythm and balance of a formal garden will still be clearly defined by the placement and outline of beds, containers, arbors, and obelisks.

### ***Informal garden designs***

If flowing curves, a casual or eclectic look, a “natural” appearance, or an edible landscape appeal to you, you might prefer informal garden designs.

Compared to the obvious symmetry and geometry of formal garden designs, informal gardens can seem haphazard and wild (frankly, sometimes they are). But the best informal designs use some of the same principles used in formal garden designs—balance and pattern—yet use them in a different way.

Designing an informal garden often takes more planning than a formal garden design. For example, using formal principles to design a balcony garden, you could buy identical containers and place them neatly along the base of the balcony railing. Regardless of what you plant in the containers, their placement will have a satisfying rhythm. Put in a little more effort by thinking about creating symmetry through the edibles you choose, and you’re golden.

In contrast, if you want to create an informal design on that same patio, you might choose several

different, yet harmonious, containers in various colors and materials, and arrange them in eye-pleasing groups of three and five. (Groups of odd numbers of items look more natural than do groups of even-numbered items.) You could then choose and place plants with an eye to creating a balance of colors, textures, and forms.

When created without planning or foresight, an informal garden—whether edible, ornamental, or a mix—can become a messy and visually unappealing mishmash. Of course, sometimes it can look awesome. Some people just have a gift for gardening by the seat of their pants.

### DESIGNING AN EDIBLE GARDEN

No matter what look you're going for, a few key design principles can help you create a gorgeous edible garden.

- Repetition, contrast, balance, and pattern: keep these concepts in mind when planning your informal garden.
- Aim for a variety of leaf shapes in your planting. Contrast crinkly leafed chard with ferny carrots and large-leafed squashes with the tall, slim straps of leeks.
- Think about plant form—for example, climbing, mounding, or cascading—when planning your planting scheme. Visualize how these shapes will look together.
- Use colorful varieties of edibles: bright, bold rhubarb; scarlet runner beans; dusky purple cabbages; jewel-toned eggplants and peppers.
- Dotted groups of similar plants throughout the garden ties the space together and creates a sense of harmony and balance, and adding plants with contrasting forms, colors, and leaf shapes adds interest.
- Don't take a one-here, one-there approach to planting. In informal gardens, place plants in odd-numbered groups or swaths for best impact.
- Taller plants should be at the back of your bed, unless you intentionally want them to shade shorter plants. That said, some variation is definitely appropriate—take too rigid an approach to height ordering, and your plants will look like they have lined up for a class photo. The word *undulate* is good to keep in mind as you visualize your informal planting scheme.

### EDIBLE LANDSCAPES AND FOREST GARDENS

In an edible landscape, some, most, or all the plants are edible. Your design can be as basic as tucking attractive herbs, veggies, and edible flowers into an existing ornamental garden, or as complex as designing a self-sustaining garden that mimics the natural forest ecosystem. In essence, edible landscaping recognizes that food-producing plants and trees can be attractive enough to hold their own in any garden. Why plant something just because it looks pretty when you can plant something that will produce food and also look good?

Think about a typical single-family home on an urban lot with basic landscaping: a tree or two, shrubs around the perimeter of the house, some flowers planted along the front walk. Nothing fancy. But if the space were designed using edible landscaping principles, the trees would be fruit- or nut-bearing, the shrubs would produce berries, and the flowers would be edible. Perhaps grapevines or kiwifruit would clamor up an arbor, with swaths of grains, herbs, sunflowers, and pumpkins edging the house.



Fruiting shrubs such as blueberries provide low-maintenance structure to an edible landscape or forest garden. Photo by Andrea Bellamy.

An edible forest garden takes the concept of edible landscaping a lot further. A forest garden is designed to replicate a woodland ecosystem, with food-producing trees, shrubs, and plants that work together in layers or stories—just like in a natural forest. Forest gardening comprises seven layers:

- **the overstory** (large fruit and nut trees)
- **the understory** (smaller trees)
- **shrubs** (berry shrubs and cane fruits)
- **herbs** (vegetables and herbs)
- **groundcovers** (low-growing edible plants)
- **roots** (root vegetables and mushrooms)
- **vines** (edible vines)

Each layer in a forest garden supports the other layers, performing multiple functions beyond food production. Trees, for example, hold water in the soil with their extensive root systems, provide support for scrambling vines, and create leaf mulch in the fall. Forest gardens are usually designed to be largely self-supporting, using perennials and self-seeding annuals to avoid the yearly spring planting marathon so familiar to most food gardeners.

Although planting a large tree may not be feasible for most small-space gardeners, forest gardens can be created on a smaller scale—even centered around one small tree.

Even the smallest spaces can be beautiful and productive gardens that show amazing style. After all, it's not the size that matters; it's how you use it.

#### ORNAMENTAL EDIBLES

Many ornamental edibles, such as those listed here, are attractive enough to be the focus of a container or garden bed. Fill out your plantings with tall, airy grains such as amaranth, flax, or quinoa and provide year-round structure with a perennial shrub such as blueberry or any fruit tree. Edible flowers such as borage, calendula, chamomile, lavender, marigold, nasturtium, and sunchoke

provide the colorful icing on the cake.

artichoke	fennel	rosemary
basil	grapes	runner beans
beets	kale	sage
cabbage	kiwi	sorrel
chard	leeks	squash
chives	lettuce	strawberries
cilantro	mushrooms	sunflower
dill	parsley	thyme
eggplant	rhubarb	



Artichokes are large, sculptural plants that provide interest and structure in an edible landscape.

## 2 ASSESSING YOUR SPACE

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*Although we can carefully select our containers and meticulously plan a planting scheme, short of leveling trees or neighboring buildings, we can't do much about the sunlight our gardens receive.*

External factors have a huge influence on the success of a garden; take the time to observe these in your space before leaping in and planting. Don't despair if, at first glance, your potential location seems unsuited to growing food. Think creatively: the problem is often the solution. Working with what is already available on your site will always be more satisfying and will yield better results than fighting natural conditions.



Before you don your gloves and dig in, take some time to observe what is already happening on your site.

*When sizing up your space, considering a few external factors can help you design the healthiest, most productive garden possible.*

### **CLIMATE**

Where you live determines your garden's climate, the length of the growing season, and how much rainfall you receive—all of which affect what you grow and how you grow it. Some edibles simply grow better in some regions than they do in others. Recognize the characteristics of your climate, and

consider how they will impact what you can grow.

For example, drought-tolerant rosemary, a Mediterranean native, needs dry, hot summers to thrive. That doesn't mean it can't be grown in rainy, mild climates, but you should try to create conditions that resemble rosemary's native habitat: provide excellent drainage by amending the soil with sand or perlite, and plant it in the sunniest spot in the garden.

Your area's hardiness zone is another important consideration. Every city or region is assigned a zone number based on its lowest average annual temperature—from Fairbanks, Alaska (zone 1), to Mazatlan, Mexico (zone 11), and everything in between. Plants are also given a zone rating, which offers gardeners a hint as to whether that type of plant will survive the winter in their area. For example, if you live in Halifax, Nova Scotia, zone 6, you should look for plants that are hardy (frost-tolerant) to zone 6 or lower.

The trouble with zone ratings, however, is that a plant's ability to thrive in a certain location depends on more than just minimum temperatures—rainfall and soil conditions, for example, also play big roles in hardiness. Plants grown in containers are also less cold-tolerant than their in-ground counterparts—something else to consider when choosing what and where to grow. You can find out which zone you live in by searching online for “plant hardiness zones.”

All that said, hardiness zones don't even come into play as far as annual edibles are concerned—most of these plants will not survive the winter anyway. But zones are definitely an important factor when you're growing plants such as fruit trees or perennial herbs.

A microclimate is an area in which the climate differs from the larger area around it: hotter, cooler, wetter, or drier, a microclimate can be as small as a balcony or as large as a valley. Many factors can change the microclimates of your garden: light bouncing off a patio or wall, heat radiating from a metal fire escape, a wind tunnel created between buildings, or a clothes dryer that vents onto your balcony. Pay attention to these factors and, if you can, use them to your advantage.

#### **FOR EVERYTHING THERE IS A (GROWING) SEASON**

The growing season refers to the length of time between your area's last killing frost in winter or spring and the first killing frost in autumn or winter—basically, it describes the season during which plants grow. Government organizations such as Environment Canada or the National Climatic Center in the United States track these dates and make them available online (search “average frost dates” or “growing season length”).

The length of your growing season will help determine what you can plant, since some plants—melons, for example—require a long, hot growing season. Seed packets often provide the number of days required for a seed to grow into a harvestable vegetable (known as days to maturity). If that number exceeds the number of days in your growing season, you should start your seeds indoors ahead of your last frost date and transplant them outside after the weather has warmed, protect the plants from late-season frosts until they can be harvested, or choose a variety that is quicker to mature.



Herbs such as sage, rosemary, and lavender are happiest if you keep their Mediterranean origins in mind: plant them in a sunny place with well-drained soil.



Concrete walls act as heat sinks, collecting warmth from the sun during the day and releasing it at night. You can take advantage of the microclimate created by these walls by growing heat-loving plants and fruit trees nearby, or by using them to support vines such as kiwi.



Peas and beets are good choices for a less-than-sunny locale.

## **LIGHT**

Sunlight—or lack of it—is a huge factor in a garden. Most fruits and vegetables require upward of six hours of direct sunlight daily to thrive. A sunny balcony or garden is considered ideal (you can always create shade if you or your plants are baking), but any patio that receives some sunlight in summer can produce food.

Make a point of recording how many hours of direct sunlight your site receives and where it falls. Then work with the amount of light you have. Planting sun-loving vegetables such as tomatoes or cucumbers in shade will just make you, and your plants, unhappy. Instead, plant edibles for part shade or, if you really are in the dark, grow mushrooms.

If the exterior walls of your home are white, remember that sunlight will bounce off the surface, providing additional light (and heat). You can mimic this effect by setting up a reflective panel such as a mirror or foil-covered board (or mitigate it using a dark color).

## **SOIL**

Your soil has such an impact on the success of your garden that I have devoted a whole chapter to it (chapter six). If you're planning on growing food in the ground (rather than in containers or raised



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