Ask a Specialist: Edible Ornamentals Enhance the Landscape and Table

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08/03/2015

Most people have never experienced having their very existence depend on the foods they could harvest from their gardens or farms. However, in the past, many of our ancestors did it for survival. Currently, raising food has become a hobby for many, but with the uncertain economy, people have again begun planting larger gardens and more fruit trees as a way to stretch their budgets.

A trend from the 1970s has come back into popularity called edible landscaping. It involves growing a traditional vegetable garden and orchard, but also having most ornamental plants in the landscape produce something edible. Instead of planting a regular shade tree, a large nut tree might be used. If a hedge row is needed, a shrub that produces an edible fruit can be grown. Below is a list of plants that can be used ornamentally as well as for food production.

• Serviceberries - These are available in both tree and shrub forms. The ripe fruit is tasty eaten fresh and can be processed into jellies or syrup. Ornamentally, shrub forms can be used as an informal screen or hedge, and the tree species are useful in areas with limited space. Both trees and shrubs develop beautiful fall foliage.

• Grapes - There are many useful, cold-hardy grapes. For juicing, varieties that show increased cold tolerance over Concord include Bluebell, Beta, Fredonia and Valiant. Traditional seedless table grapes include Himrod, Interlaken and Canadice, but in extremely cold temperatures, these may be damaged. Edelweiss, a green, seedless grape, is more cold tolerant. It should be harvested slightly early. If not, it may develop an excessively strong flavor. For landscape use, vines for screening can be grown along fences or over trellises.

• Walnuts - Various walnut species have been grown in Utah for a number of years. They can be used as shade trees. Japanese heart nut is a medium-sized walnut species, useful in smaller yards. Walnuts generally require infrequent but periodic deep watering to maintain their health. Walnuts require cross-pollination, and two different varieties of seed-grown trees should be planted for maximum production.

• Hazelnuts or Filberts - There are a number of hazelnut varieties and species available. Most shrubs grow to the same height and width as an old fashioned lilac shrub. One species, Turkish filbert, may be available and grows into a beautiful small-to-medium tree. Like walnuts, hazelnuts require cross-pollination. Two different varieties or seed-grown plants should be planted for maximum production.

These are just a few species that have multiple uses in the yard. Others commonly grown and worth trying for both ornamental uses and food production include elderberries, currents, hybrid American plums, tart cherries and dwarf columnar apples.

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