

The Kitchen Garden

“Simply put, a kitchen garden is a place to grow things that you bring into the kitchen—vegetables, fruits and berries, herbs, edible flowers and cut flowers. It is a place of beauty and bounty, a place that stimulates and delights all the senses. The perfect blend of aesthetics and utility, the kitchen garden is a paradise where you can not just look, touch, and smell, but also taste.” Carol Turner in Kitchen Gardens

My own kitchen garden has become more than a vegetable patch, more than an herb bed or a flower garden – it has become, well, a personal space where I find food, flavors, colors, and beauty in an intentional and accidental collection of nature’s creatures. It’s more a place to forage than to harvest, more a place to experiment and wonder than to sow and reap. It has become my eclectic assemblage of nations and histories, some ancient, some heirloom, some wondrously new.

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, my garden may look utterly disheveled to others. If you like straight and orderly rows of uniform plants, it may take you time to see the beauty in my kitchen garden where seeds germinate beneath plants ready to be eaten. It may take your eye a while to adjust to the wondrous cycle in a bed of European Leeks and South American Lima Beans – an intercontinental dance round the seasons – one warm, one cool. It may take a while to notice seedlings of lettuce, sorrel, spinach beet, swiss chard, mountain orach, giant red mustard, carrots and bachelor buttons sprouting up through a green mulch of dwarf white clover. Most will be salad before their youth is spent, but a few will flower and seed the bed again.

Cooking has become an extension of gardening as gardening has become a necessity for eating. What’s for dinner is often determined by what’s in the garden. Recipes are invented to fit the garden, the seasons and our tastes. Some things are preserved, but there’s never enough as much of what the garden provides cannot be bought. So, we wait until the season comes round again. I’ve grown to appreciate this seasonal eating. Appreciating the memory of tastes discovered and revisiting those tastes in their season. There’s something delicious about waiting for old favorites and new discoveries that may become old favorites.

For centuries folks have lived on the land in this way. Knowing the seasons and the cycles of plants. Watching the interactions of plants and animals and influencing them to benefit the harvest. Observing and selecting preferred plant for replanting in thousands of places, for thousands of years has yielded thousands of varieties fit for both garden and hearth. It’s an ancient practice passed from generation to generation.

This most ancient of agricultures appears to be reemerging in North America. The Canadian Government has encouraged and supported it for over 25 years. The U.S. government is beginning to take steps in that direction and many local organizations are working to revitalize the practice of “growing your own” with education centers, demonstration gardens, workshops and community gardens, schoolyard gardens, virtual gardens and a world wide web of suppliers and advisors. And in some communities the Extension Services and their Master Gardeners are in the forefront of this new old way of naturally feeding ourselves from the bounty of the earth.

Darrol Shillingburg – Master Gardener Intern
February 2005