

Designing Your Edible Hedge

The easiest way to create an edible hedge is to start from scratch.

Edible hedges should include a mix of edible plants, "insectary" plants (plants that attract pollinators, which can increase the productivity of your hedge by up to 30%), and plants chosen for their beauty. Many plants will fulfill at least two of these functions, and some will even fulfill all three.

Depending on the size of your property, you may or may not want to include trees in your hedge. Full size fruit and nut trees can overwhelm a small lot. However, there are many dwarf fruit tree varieties and small understory trees such as dogwood and crabapple that can make excellent additions to an edible hedge. If you want your edible hedge to double as a windbreak in order to lower your winter heating bills, be sure to include some conifers and other evergreens as well.

In a smaller yard, it is probably best to use flowering and fruiting shrubs as the tallest plants in your hedge. There are dozens of excellent choices for an edible hedge in the Midwest, including blueberry, raspberry, blackberry, serviceberry, hazelnut, elderberry, chokecherry, aronia, Nanking cherry, wild plum, gooseberry, currant, shrub roses, and some viburnums.

In addition to trees and shrubs, incorporate native wildflowers. These are not only beautiful, they also attract plenty of pollinators, which will increase the productivity of your edible plants. Adding a mix of native ornamental grasses provides cover and food for birds and other wildlife, and is especially important for those hoping to attract grassland birds such as pheasants or quail. Good native flowers and grasses for the Midwest include little bluestem, switchgrass, purple coneflower, New England aster, bee balm, joe pye weed, cupplant, and sunflowers.

Plant a mix of annual and perennial vegetables on the sunny side of your edible hedge. The hedge will create a warm, protected micro-climate for them, extending your growing season.

Herbs are an especially good choice to plant in your edible hedge because most are multi-purpose: they are edible, beautiful, and they attract pollinators who will also visit nearby vegetables and fruits. Some of the best include basil, thyme, sage, and dill.

You can also add groundcovers such as strawberries and white clover (a nitrogen-fixing legume that improves the health of nearby plants). Groundcovers act like living mulches, shading out weeds and keeping the soil cool and moist.

Mulch your new hedge heavily to reduce weeding and watering needs while it becomes established. Replant annuals as necessary every year, and every 5-10 years, thin the hedge strategically so that it remains diverse and productive. Prune as necessary to keep the neighbors happy.

If you already have a hedge that you want to convert to an edible hedge, thin it strategically and start planting edible shrubs, trees, and herbaceous plants in the gaps and edges. A good goal is to convert a single row into two or three staggered rows of plants to encourage maximum productivity.

In order to reduce disturbance to the roots of the remaining established plants, don't till the area you plan to plant. Instead dig individual holes for each new plant, and mulch heavily to reduce weeds. (Laying down a layer of newspaper or cardboard under the mulch is a biodegradable way to kill turf grasses or other unwanted plants.)

Landscaping with Fruit Trees and Shrubs

If you don't have room for full-size fruit trees, check out the new miniatures and dwarfs now available. Some grow just 4 or 5 feet tall and are perfect for growing in large pots or whiskey barrels.

\Rhubarb is so pretty it's a shame to relegate it to the vegetable garden. Tuck it into the flower bed or border. It's especially nice underplanted with purple-leaved Ajuga or another low-growing groundcover.

Strawberries make an excellent edging plant as well as a good groundcover. Plant them in long rows, one or two plants deep, along the edges of flower beds and borders. Or use them on a sunny slope or any other area where you want a pretty groundcover. They cover themselves with white flowers in spring, and the leaves turn a rich russet in fall.

- Blueberry and currant bushes are pretty enough to use as decorative shrubs. Plant a whole hedge of them to assure plenty of fruit.
- Grapevines are beautiful plants. Try growing two of them up over an arbor. When you're not harvesting grapes, you can use the leaves, either green or tinged by autumn color, to decoratively line plates and platters. Top with salads or cheeses.
- Raspberries are expensive to buy at the supermarket, but a snap to grow at home. If you're concerned about having too many all at once, plant the ever-bearing types, which will produce from midsummer to frost. Also, they do well in light to medium shade, so you can plant them in an out-of-the-way corner of the yard.

Try growing short vining-type vegetables up trellises along the back of a flower border. Melons, cucumbers, and zucchini can all be trained to grow vertically; this means fewer fungal disease problems.

- Get creative with your vegetable garden design. Consider creating a series of decorative raised beds with wood-chip- or gravel-lined paths between. Check out photos of historic French gardens for inspiration -- they're beautiful and efficient.

Plant vegetables with their looks as well as flavors in mind. Alternate, for example, pretty purple cabbage with snowy white [cauliflower](#) in a row. Or experiment with planting in blocks and clusters rather than rows for a more decorative effect.

Many vegetables lend themselves beautifully to containers. Lettuces in various colors are gorgeous in window boxes. Patio-type tomatoes are ideal in large pots. [Hot peppers](#) ripen to rich colors that are attractive when mixed in with annual flowers such as marigolds and vinca.

- Tomatoes probably grow better in flower beds than they do in the traditional vegetable garden. That's because they should be moved to a different spot each year to prevent disease, and space is often limited in a vegetable patch. Also, tomatoes do better when isolated from other tomato plants because disease can't hop as easily from plant to plant.
- Lettuces make a great edging plant, especially those that are deep reds and purples. Plant in a row along the front of a bed or border.

Don't let a little shade deter you from planting vegetables. Fairly shade-tolerant veggies include beets, [Brussels sprouts](#), cabbage, cauliflower, garlic, leaf lettuce, spinach, turnips, [radishes](#), and beans.

- Seek out vegetables in bold colors to interplant among the flowers. Swiss chard, for example, is available in a rainbow of colors. Or try brilliant yellow sweet peppers.

Pole beans have attractive heart-shape leaves that are fairly decorative. They're good for planting on arbors, along fences, or on any [trellis](#).

- Some mustard greens and kales have gorgeous fall color and are ideal for tucking into containers and borders for color late in the year. Try Osaka Purple mustard greens or one of the red or purple kales.