

Perennial Edibles

In our ongoing exploration of ecology-focused gardening, we have discussed planting for habitat and providing food for butterflies, bees, & birds. How about providing food for people too!? Many of our food garden practices historically rely on annuals. In turn, we have largely ignored a remarkable selection of perennial root, leaf, and fruit crops. Much of our home garden food production is like a miniature version of our industrial model: high-effort, high-energy, and high-turnover. With perennial edibles, you can plant a crop once and harvest year after year. They have great diversity in taste, use, and form (including herbaceous, woody, and vining plants). By utilizing these plants, we can create beautiful, lush, high-yield, resilient food gardens!

Perennial edibles are lower maintenance than typical annual food crops. They require less water and less fertilizer, like other perennials. Once established, they are more resistant to disease, weeds, pests, and drought. Many provide food over a longer period, or have a completely different harvest season, than typical annual vegetables. Some grow so robust they may be divided and propagated year to year. This is the case with *Allium sativum* (Garlic): as they thicken each year, replant the smaller ones, harvest larger ones. You will have a continually growing supply, yielding more garlic year after year.

Annual vegetables are often grown in a sea of open, freshly tilled soil - perfect conditions for weeds, bleaching of soil, and loss of topsoil. With perennial edibles there is no tilling needed. Rather than disrupting the soil annually, create a healthy and stable soil profile. They support the development of complex organic matter through decomposition and building of topsoil.

Perennial edibles include unusual and interesting offerings! Useful, delicious plants that many have never heard of, let alone tasted. These include *Sium* (Skirret), with sweet edible roots, once used in Middle Ages Europe as ubiquitously as potatoes are today. *Apios* (Groundnut) is a nutty legume that can be prepared in a myriad of ways.

Layer the landscape! Edible woodies and vines will add structure and visual levels to the garden. *Lathyrus tuberosus* (Earthnut Pea) will ramble on the ground, onto other plants, or up a trellis. The delicious *Actinidia 'Issai'* (Hardy Kiwi) is a long vine great for covering arbors and fences. *Amelanchier* (Serviceberry) and *Sambucus canadensis* (Black Elderberry) both provide visual height, bear beautiful flowers, irresistible fruit, and attract birds & pollinators.

With showy leaves, stunning flowers, and beautiful fruit, perennial edibles rival ornamentals. Use them in your existing ornamental gardens. *Prunus maritima* (Beach Plum) has big, bold fruit, elegant branches, and a gorgeous round form. *Aronia* (Black Chokeberry) has delicate white flowers that attract butterflies, handsome fruit clusters, and beautiful burgundy fall foliage. *Rumex* (Red Veined Sorrel) has a bright citrus flavor, but its leaves are showy enough to plant for their looks alone.

Perennial edibles are fantastic multi-purpose plants. They are nutritious food crops, stunning ornamentals, provide ecological services, reduce labor, and save resources. Perennial edibles offer us the chance to build a more holistic landscape, with deeper relationships between wildlife, soil, plants, and people. By giving these plants a permanent place in our gardens, we blur the line between ornamental and edible. Maybe they can help us to embrace the interconnectedness of nature in our gardening practice.