



Upscale your vegetable garden

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID HOBSON

Are you thinking of going back to the future this year by starting a small vegetable plot?

All the best restaurants have one, from classy Michelin-starred ones in Paris to Langdon Hall, one of our region's finest. They all know the most delicious vegetables are the ones that have travelled the shortest distance from garden to table. A tomato with miles on it can't compare with one plucked from your own garden and eaten within minutes. As for herbs, homegrown taste nothing like the contents of those cute little jars sitting in a rack in the kitchen. Unlike wine, not all herbs age well.

But what about all the work that's involved, you ask. Well, we're not talking market-garden scale here – just a few square feet can be surprisingly productive.

What's more, the little activity involved can be subtracted from time spent at the gym. Not a week goes by without more research showing the health benefits gained from a little time spent working in a garden. In a Dutch study comparing stress in two groups, the levels of participants who spent 30 minutes on garden tasks were much lower than the group that sat indoors reading. Other current research shows exposure to soil microbes can produce positive benefits.

As for appearance, after spending a fortune on a beautifully designed landscape, I can understand resistance to plunking down a vegetable patch. So, let's dispel the thought that such a patch must be unattractive. A design based on the concept of garden rooms lends itself well to food production, particularly one designed as a

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TOP: Introduced in 15th-century France, "parterre" is an example of how you can design your vegetable garden.

BOTTOM ROW: After starting off with the basics, you'll soon be able to grow things such as, from left, black tomatoes, green candy-stripe peppers and hot peppers.

"parterre." You can give a section dedicated to herbs and vegetables the stylish name "jardin potager."

Introduced in France during the 15th-century Renaissance, a parterre was traditionally designed using symmetrical patterns or in the form of a knot garden. Sections for planting were bordered by paths and low hedging, most often boxwood. What was good enough for

Versailles would surely be as impressive in a suburban setting.

OK, the three parterres at Versailles were massive affairs and highly ornamental, enclosing lawns, fountains and glorious statuary. They were situated to be seen from above, every intricate detail visible. Locate your vegetable parterre where it can be viewed from an upper storey or deck and you'll have created a vista that would make

Louis XIV proud.

Instead of boxwood borders, the edges can be constructed with lumber, laid out in similar style — a mini Versailles. And now you can see where I'm going. Does this sound like a raised bed, a concept that's become increasingly popular?

Whether for growing flowers or vegetables, it's long been the practice to raise the soil level at least partly above the surrounding area to provide enough depth for roots and to prevent the patch from becoming waterlogged. It isn't essential that beds be enclosed with structural sides. In the traditional gardens seen in our rural areas, this style is seldom seen. Plants don't care in the slightest. When edges slope off naturally, excess rainfall is shed more easily.

A constrained suburban backyard, however, typically serves many functions. Space is needed for pools and patios or playsets and pet corrals. By providing solid borders on a small section for growing vegetables, there's no overlap of functions, and a raised bed will remain neat and tidy after the harvest is in.

As the amount of pleasure derived from growing your own food increases — plus the subsequent health benefits derived from having one's hands in the soil — more beds can be added. When divided and interconnected with attractive gravel paths or even elaborate paving stones, it can easily be transformed into an elegant version of a classic parterre.

Building a basic raised bed is as simple as knocking together a square box using four pieces of two-by-eight lumber. It only needs to be 1½ metres square, although it can be any shape, size or height. The idea is that it's designed to allow access from at least one side without having to step on the bed, compacting the soil. The lumber used can be anything from construction grade spruce that will hold up for a few years to an exotic hardwood such as Brazilian ipe that lasts forever. Brick or concrete is

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another option.

But if we're moving into a class worthy of Versailles, elaborate stonework is the answer. And there's no reason not to plunk a piece of statuary among the peppers to add a little style.

Plans and designs for all types of construction are widely available. Tara Nolan of Dundas has produced an excellent, bestselling resource, "Raised Bed Revolution," with the subtitle "Build It, Fill It, Plant It . . . Garden Anywhere!" This ultimate guidebook is filled with more than enough information to build the perfect raised-bed vegetable garden in any location.

Building and tending one can also be a wonderful opportunity to introduce children to the real world of food production. ("Yes, my child, this potato truly is where french fries come from.")

Once built, your raised bed will need

soil – more and better soil than the meagre amount on the dark side of the turf that's in most backyards. Regular topsoil is fine, depending on the source. Clay soil is heavy and will need annual tilling if it becomes compacted. Sandy soil has fewer nutrients and dries out quickly. A satisfactory alternative is triple mix. There's no standard composition, but it's usually a blend of regular soil, compost and peat moss, making it crumbly and easy to work with.

The other essential component for growing vegetables is a location that receives at least six hours of full sun. That's the minimum, and it suits most leafy plants such as lettuce and spinach, but fruit-bearing ones like tomatoes and peppers do need as much light as possible. You will need to balance the amount of light available in the preferred location with what is optimum for specific vegetables.

Once planted, there's little work involved – mulch well and there'll be no weeding – but your garden will need regular attention, especially during dry spells. Raised beds have a tendency to dry out faster than a ground-based bed, especially along the edges. Hot days, a lack of rain, someone forgets to water, and there goes the salad.

And what's a salad without tomatoes and lettuce. They're among the easiest things to grow. Overall, it is best to begin modestly before attempting a huge parterre-style garden with a massive range of colourful and attractive vegetables.

Tasty, nutritious produce might be the goal, but when the esthetics of this new venture are to be considered, there's no limit. In fact, there are vegetables attractive enough to be planted in formal flowerbeds. One such is a variety of the current

superfood kale called Lacinato, a traditional ingredient of minestrone. It's also known as Tuscan kale, Italian kale or dinosaur kale. The crinkly leaves are long and slender, dark blue-green to black, and there are purple varieties, too. Eat it or admire it (or both). It looks wonderful in a flowerbed or in a planter.

In fact, a large planter can be the first step toward the raised-bed concept — crops in pots. Fill a large one with kale and Swiss chard, the rainbow kind with stems of pink, yellow, orange and red, and it will look so beautiful you might not want to eat it – but do.

There are lots of vegetables in exciting colours that are not easily found in a store. Potatoes are available in colourful reds, yellows and purples. The first carrots grown were either purple or white, not even close to orange. There's a range of colours that

will outshine any of the mini orange ones destined for dipping. Add these colourful carrots to a platter of hors d'oeuvres and you'll have a work of art. Even cauliflower has style. Not only white, but purple or rich, golden yellow ones.

There are more than 3,000 heirloom varieties of tomatoes in enough shapes, sizes and colours to match any dining room décor, even black, although the black one turns red before it's ripe enough to eat.

An eye-catching sweet pepper is Candy Cane. Green and white striped, the stripes change to pink and red as it ripens. For a whimsical touch, new this year is the uniquely shaped Mad Hatter, a sweet pepper from South America used in Peruvian and Bolivian cuisine. The Mad Hatter may have worn a top hat, but this pepper looks more like a squished toque — so Canadian.

Whether in the garden or on the table, combinations of form, colour and texture using vegetables are unlimited.

In her recently published book "Veggie Garden Remix," popular author Niki Jabbour from Nova Scotia lists an intriguing selection of 224 plants in a veritable vegetable travelogue. Many of the plants are considered delicacies in far-off cultures, though they're rarely seen or grown locally. With information on how to grow each type successfully, Jabbour includes plenty of fun facts and history.

By growing the freshest of vegetables in your own backyard, you'll have a range of colours to complement the finest décor, and you'll impress your guests both with your culinary skills and with fascinating stories about the food you are serving. It might earn you a Michelin star — Bib Gourmand-status. 🍴



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