

The French Potager—a Garden for Food and Pleasure

A vegetable garden in France is called a potager (poe-taaj-ay) which comes from potage, which is vegetable soup. In America, the vegetable garden has often been a part of the garden separated from the rest and treated like a small farm field—plowed (or rototilled), planted in rows for the season, and then empty. The potager is first of all a garden—permanent, decorative, cultivated by hand methods, incorporating shrubs, trees, paths, and beds of herbs, vegetables, and flowers. These gardens, though they are often considered a new development in the US, have in fact been the normal type of garden in France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, North Africa, Persia, and many other places for a very long time—the Middle Ages in Europe, and as much as four thousand years in Persia and North Africa. One of the sources of Grow Biointensive was the French gardeners who supplied the entire city of Paris with year-round fresh vegetables from the local area. (To learn more, see our books *The Sustainable Vegetable Garden* and *How to Grow More Vegetables*, and our video *Gardensong*. Books on potagers include *Designing the New Kitchen Garden*, by Jennifer Bartley, *Gardens of Plenty*, by Marylyn Abbott, and *The Potager*, by Louisa Jones.)

Important features of the traditional potager are:

- garden beds surrounded by permanent paths
- beds may or may not have edgings of herbs, evergreens, wood, stone, etc
- intensive soil preparation for close planting and continuous cropping
- decorative design—some call it edible landscaping
- plants grown for many purposes—flowers, vegetables, herbs, privacy, etc
- many types of plant—trees, shrubs, perennials, annuals
- year-round value as landscape—interest from design, evergreens, trees
- productive for much or all of the year—cold frames, mulches, perennials

Traditional designs were generally based on formal, symmetrical patterns, but many potagers have been planned using more flowing, free-form shapes as well. Since plants themselves will have billowy, free-form shapes, a formal design will look much softer and livelier in real life than it does on paper, will make planting and upkeep somewhat simpler, and will often maximize productivity, but either type can make a beautiful, productive garden. Abstract shapes, spirals, and curved beds are all popular—the important thing is that you be able to reach all the plants without stepping or kneeling in the bed; a path on each side means the bed can be wider. Fruit trees and berries are traditionally used along the edges or grouped to create a shaded area to sit, perhaps a terrace. Perennial flowers, shade-loving herbs, or strawberries grow at their feet. Or the tree is mulched, with an edging of strawberries. The alpine strawberry is a tiny bush which stays put and doesn't send out runners, so it is an excellent edging, lovely with roses. In sunny beds, tiny hedges of herbs, strawberries, flowers, or greens can make a decorative edging, or the planting may be totally free-form, mixing vegetables and flowers to make contrasts of color and texture, with no rules other than providing the right conditions for each; pairing tall blue-green leeks with fluffy red lettuce is not only pretty, but ensures that the taller plant is not so floppy and wide that it will cover or shade the lettuce. Annual flowers, especially the edible ones, are mixed with vegetables, and perennial vegetables mixed with permanent flowers and shrubs. I have a semi-shaded oasis of rhubarb, black cohosh, primroses, and angelica under dogwoods and fruit trees, and a sunny bed where roses and berry bushes back up thyme, sage, and pinks. Red lettuce and kale interspersed with garlic, cornflowers, and marigolds are planted in newly-dug beds. Elsewhere, the glossy leaves and multicolored stems of chard make shade for the parsley, pansies, and chervil beneath. Red Flanders poppies and arugula grow between cabbages, finishing before the cabbage needs the space .

Vegetables in France are often served as a separate course, and raw vegetables appear as a first course all year round—grated carrots vinaigrette, sliced tomatoes, grated celery-root in mayonnaise, or a few perfect radishes can make an appetizing start to the meal and prevent overeating as well.

Spring recipe: Ragout de Feves (Savory Fava Beans)

2 lbs. fava beans in the pod	1 tsp thyme
a few drops lemon juice	3-6 young carrots, thinly sliced
butter or olive oil	1 ½ cups thinly sliced spring onions
1tbsp finely chopped garlic	parsley

If the beans are tiny, they may be cooked pod and all. (Try one and see how you like it). Otherwise, shell the beans. Plunge them into boiling water for 1 minute, run cold water over them til they are cool enough to handle, and pop each bean out of its skin. You should get about 3 cups of beans. In a skillet, heat 3 tbsp butter or olive oil. Put in the beans, onion, garlic, carrots, and thyme. Salt and pepper. Cook til onions are soft and the beans tender, about 5 minutes. Moisten with water or broth if needed. Scatter parsley and lemon on top; serve with roast meat and a piquant salad.

Summer Recipe: Haricots a la Provencale (Green Beans & Tomatoes)

When young and very small, wax beans are simply boiled or steamed, drained, heated with a good lump of butter, and served, often as a separate course. After they are older, try this:

String the beans and break into chunks. Boil or steam for 10 minutes, then turn drain. In a skillet, heat 2 tbsp olive oil. Put in a clove of garlic, the green beans and 2 chopped tomatoes. Cook on medium heat til the beans are tender and the tomatoes have made a sauce.

When the beans have gotten large and the pods are tough, you may shell the beans and cook them this way, too. They are excellent on their own, over rice or pasta, or just with chunks of good bread and perhaps cheese, as a summer supper.

Fall recipe: Tarte au Potiron (Main-Dish Pumpkin Pie)

1 ½ lbs. pumpkin	½ cup milk
1/3 cup crème fraiche or cream	2 tbsp butter
3 oz gruyere (Swiss) cheese, grated	1 tsp parsley, chopped
½ teasp thyme leaves finely chopped	nutmeg
2 medium leeks or one large onion	1 pie crust, baked 8 minutes only and cooled

Preheat oven to 400. Cut the pumpkin in half, remove seeds and strings. Bake on an oiled pan, face-down until tender, about an hour. Scoop out flesh and mash well. Trim and wash leeks, slice thin, and cook gently in melted butter with a pinch of salt until soft.

Beat the eggs in a bowl with the crème fraiche or cream, the milk, and 1 i/2 cups pumpkin. Add the leeks, cheese, herbs, and season to taste with salt, pepper, and a bit of nutmeg. Pour into the pie shell. Turn the oven down to 375. Place the pie pan on a cookie sheet, preferably dark (or a griddle) and bake 50 minutes.

Winter recipe: Potage Bonne Femme (Good Wife's Soup)

1 lb potatoes	3 carrots
2 large leeks	2 tbsp butter
1 qt broth or water	½ to 1 cup cream or milk
parsley or chervil, chopped fine	1 tsp sugar

Wash and finely slice the leeks, dice carrots, peel and chop potatoes. Melt the butter in your soup pot; put in the leeks and carrots. Stir and cook on a gentle heat til the vegetables are hot and fragrant. Put in the potatoes, water or broth, sugar, and some salt. Simmer 30 minutes covered. Put through a sieve or food processor til smooth, and return to pan. Taste for seasoning, add salt if necessary, add cream or milk—the soup should not be as thick as American creamed soups, but not watery. Sprinkle with finely chopped parsley or chervil, and serve. Delicious with kale, spinach, or other winter vegetables instead of carrots.