

Edible Perennials

By Dora Wood, Chippewa Valley Master Gardner Volunteer

With events causing major changes to our daily lives, some folks are beginning to think about becoming more self sustaining or ways to plant and grow their own food or how they might reduce their food budget.

For many years, I have had a passion for edible perennials. Perennials are plants which come up year after year. You plant them once and enjoy their bounty for years. Edible, of course, means certain parts, and sometimes even the whole plant, are safe to eat. You may think that planting a perennial garden sounds expensive. It can be, but doesn't need to be; especially if you start small. Many of my plants I've started from seeds, which are quite reasonable compared to purchasing as a potted or mature plant. Some edibles are even free, as in the case of the common dandelion, and if your yard is anything like mine, they may already be prolific. The entire dandelion plant is edible: leaves, root, and flower. I could write an entire article on the uses and benefits of just the common dandelion. Gradually, little by little, year by year, I have added to my edible perennial collection and I now currently have over 50 different edibles, purposefully, growing around my yard.

You may say, "I don't want or have space for a garden plot in my yard", or "What will my neighbors say?" However, what many people do not realize is it that many edible perennials are not only "edible" but very beautiful and can be wonderful enhancements to your landscape. Take for example the Rosa Rugosa bush rose. This is a native rose, not the hybrid tea rose you might be used to seeing. Due to being a native, it has more pest and disease resistance. It is also a beautiful flowering shrub that just happens to have wonderful large rose hips left behind, when the flowers fade, that are edible and great for making teas. Adding perennials around your home can add curb appeal and functionality to your yard. Besides, who wouldn't mind a little less lawn to mow?

Herbs are probably the most commonly identified edible plant. Herbs also have additional benefits beyond the culinary arts, such as pest control properties and high disease resistance. Some perennial herbs that I grow are: chives, garlic chives, mint, sage, thyme, stinging nettle, lemon balm, lovage, salad burnett, chamomile, lavender, oregano, and sorrel. Add some lovage (celery flavor), salad burnett (cucumber flavor), a little chives (onion flavor) to your fresh greens from the garden. Wow! What a salad!

The second most commonly thought of edible perennials are likely the larger edibles, like trees. I happen to have apple, pear, plum, cherry, and hazelnut trees growing in my yard. A fresh pear, right off the tree is so awesome. Not everyone has the desire or

yard space for trees and they take a few years to begin fruit production, yet think of your favorite fruit and consider the possibility of planting your own.

Often people do not know that many flowers are edible and most are extremely easy to grow. As you look over the following list of edible flowers I have growing, you'll notice some you can probably get from a friend or neighbor, others are native and still others may be considered weeds. My flower list includes: lilacs, day lilies, Echinacea, dandelion, columbine, clover, bee balm, lavender, peony, phlox, and poppies. All of these have edible flowers.

That brings us to my favorite edible perennial family, berries. Most everyone enjoys fresh June strawberries, the ever prolific rhubarb, asparagus and raspberries. What you may not know is there are many, and I mean many, other edible shrubs and berries available to grow in our area. Personally, I have: grapes, kiwi, aronia, jostaberries, gooseberries, strawberries, raspberries, elderberries, goji berries, lingonberries, honeyberries, cranberries, currants, and wintergreen.

A couple other common edible perennials are asparagus and rhubarb. Oh, and let's not forget for the beer enthusiast, hops.

Edible perennials can be strategically planted together using integrated pest management techniques. This allows for the plant to work together for the health of your yard and garden. For example, I plant my chives and onions, near or underneath my fruit trees. Many pests do not like the allium (onion) family and will keep their distance, saving me time, energy and money in caring for my fruit trees. I harvest some of the chives for myself; leave others to flower. They have a beautiful flower and the blossoms provide food for beneficial insects, which also help keep the undesirable pests away. It's a win-win situation for all of us; me, the beneficial insects, my plants and fruit trees.

I hope you take some time to consider the possibilities of adding edible perennials to your garden or landscape.

Happy Growing!