

# Potager garden: a mixed bed



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Ask a Master Gardener

**Q**uestion: What is a potager garden?

**A**nsWER: Potager (pronounced pow tuh jay) gardens are a French style of gardening that incorporates herbs, fruits and vegetables with flowers and ornamentals to create a functional, aesthetically pleasing space.

Potager is a French term that means a thick, vegetable soup, so historically, a potager garden provides the ingredients for soup.

Potagers were established in monasteries by French monks in the 16th century to provide food and medicinal herbs. As time progressed, the medieval masses planted potager gardens because the ability to grow one's own vegetables, particularly those that could be stored for the winter, made their lives much more self-sufficient.

As towns developed in France, families were typically given two plots of land: one in the village for their home and on the other side, just outside the walls, one to grow produce. Eventually, the gardens were situated at the back of the house, close to the kitchen.

Potager gardens today can be a well-designed combination of informal and formal layouts. The goal is to design and carefully select plants to provide a sensory and textural appeal that is charming, enchanting and beautiful.

Yes, the goal is to grow the vegetables and herbs you desire for your own self-sufficiency, but also at the same time, to grow food for the pleasure of doing so. Many consider their potager gardens to be a sanctuary.

So how to get started? First, lay out your design on paper. Huge parts of what distinguishes a potager garden from a typical row vegetable garden are the artistic design elements. When designing a potager garden, you must first plan your pathways.

Your pathways must create a sense of direction so you can easily stroll through your garden. You will need to decide your layout. Will you



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use intermixed square and rectangular beds? Will you use a circular pie-shaped layout? Your layout will be greatly influenced by the amount of space you have dedicated to a potager garden.

Next go to your selected spot and do a mock-up of the layout using anything you can get your hands on - caution tape, string, stakes, posts, buckets, etc. You want to make sure your paths are wide enough for your wheelbarrow. Once your plan is on paper, take those plans in hand, and walk through that space.

Spending time on the actual design is key to your success.

Anticipate the environmental challenges such as sun and shade patterns, the direction of the wind, and the flow of rainwater. The more effort you put into your mock-up, the better result you'll have when the work actually begins. Don't rush through this step.

Once you have a working plan, you just need to put it into motion, but be organized in how you implement your plan. If you are starting a brand new garden, install whatever goes underground first.



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Prepare your beds and add any large decorative elements before installing fencing. If you are going to add garden gates, think about which direction the gate will swing.

Next, add fixed structures such as trellises, picket fences, an old wheelbarrow, bricks, a water feature, an arbor or a sitting area. Not only can these fixed structures add artistic detail but may also create a sense of privacy.

In any garden, full sun, good drainage and healthy soil are

all required, but with some artistic design, you can make your potager garden a canvas. Try organizing by flower, fruit or leaf color. Play with plant heights and leaf textures.

Think about the old adage "thrillers, fillers, and spillers." Use upright plants as your thriller. Use large-leafed plants as your filler. Use low-growing leafy greens as your spiller to fill in the foreground.

You will want to include perennial herbs and flower patches along the edges of the

walkways. Traditionally, flowers such as borage, sunflowers, nasturtiums and marigolds are found in a potager garden.

Once you are at the stage of maintaining your garden, be ready to succession plant. When you pull something up, have something ready to go into that bare spot. Harvesting only what you need, when you need it, and transplanting or seeding as you go keeps beds from being empty. When beds are empty, keep them covered with compost or straw. Covered soil is more aesthetically appealing than bare dirt.

You can start a potager in any season when the ground is workable. Potager gardens will be as varied as the many gardeners who design them.

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*Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu) or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*