

Vibrant Garden Community Begins with ‘Useful’ Plants

Amy Ockerlander, Environmental Educator



Many of us tend to divide our garden into sections according to use. For instance, there's the vegetable garden, the herb garden, the perennial garden, the hedge, the flower garden and maybe even the orchard (if you are lucky!). What if your garden could serve all or many of these purposes without boundary lines? If we think of our garden as a collection of “useful” plants that we plant based on their ability to provide a multitude of functions, we increase the usefulness of our landscape for ourselves and the environment. The result is a beautiful community of easy to care for and highly purposeful plants.

Choosing Useful Plants

When composing a list of plants, make it a goal to choose individual plants that provide as many functions as they can for you. Functions should be based on what you need or want. Here are some to consider: produces food for humans, creates wildlife habitat, provides materials for trellising, supplies a buffer to traffic noise or frames a view. Plants could also provide a sensory experience such as fragrance or beauty, or contribution to soil-building by either fixing nitrogen or providing materials for mulching the garden.

Observe Nature's Design

Nature is truly efficient. Natural plant communities make use of every square inch of real estate, horizontally and vertically. Nature's pattern is what we want to mirror for our own garden spaces. Think in terms of layers: canopy tree, vines, shrubs, herbaceous perennials, groundcovers, bulbs and annual, selfsowing plants. What layer is missing in your garden? There's your opportunity for incorporating a “useful” plant.

In small spaces, you may have room for only the lower layers. In narrow planting spaces, you may start with the vine layer, taking advantage of available space vertically. This model can be modified in various ways to fit your space. Finding Plant Information So where do you turn for useful plant info? I highly recommend signing up for Seattle Tilth's series of classes “Beyond the Vegetable Garden,” scheduled for next year. You'll receive an extensive plant list and plenty of inspiration. Also check out the Permaculture and sustainable landscaping offerings for more ideas.

Until then, browse the Plants for a Future Database (www.pfaf.org). Plants are rated and researched according to their usefulness. Local nurseries and regional perennial food plant growers are also an invaluable resource to turn to. For resources, contact the Garden Hotline.

To see it in practice, visit SeattleTilth's community learning garden at the Good Shepherd Center, where we display several groupings of perennial and annual plants that are designed to support our needs in a variety of ways.

Seattle Tilth inspires and educates people to grow food organically, conserve natural resources and support local food systems in order to cultivate a healthy urban environment and community.

For more information, visit seattletilth.org.