

IN-VOGUE VEGGIES



Swiss chard 'Peppermint'

Customers are on the hunt for edibles, and these six trends show just what appetizing varieties should be stocked and ready at your store.

By Heather Kibble

The years since 2008 have brought a resurgence of cooking at home and “stay-cations.” Americans are investing in their homes and family time, and many are looking to spend money on shared experiences, not just goods.

The economy has improved just enough to encourage first-time home buyers, but not enough for everyone to splurge on long, exotic vacations or fancy restaurant meals every night.

Americans will have plenty of time at home this summer to make home improvements, entertain, cook and keep the kids busy. Edible gardens do all this and more.

There is no doubt 2015 is a going to be a banner year for edibles. Here are some trends to be ready for.

Cooking in the Garden

From the “kitchen garden” to “cooking in the garden,” outdoor cooking has been hot the last few years.

We’ve built outdoor kitchens, embraced pizza ovens, bought smokers and installed built-in barbecues, fire pits and bars.

All this outdoor cooking and entertaining should drive the desire for fresh-from-the-garden produce.

Be ready with peppers, squash, eggplants and tomatoes for kebabs, roasting or pizza topping.

Cut-and-come-again salad greens like arugula, leaf lettuce, beet greens and pak choi will produce weekend after weekend.

Other summer staples such as cucumbers and grape tomatoes, like grape tomato ‘Sweet Hearts’, will turn salads up a notch.

The well-stocked outdoor bar should include pots of herbs – basil, mint, thyme, lemon verbena and rosemary would be a good start. These could be sold as individual plants or in combinations ready to set on the table bar.

Freshness is key, so encourage customers to plant edibles over a few weekends – not just on the first Saturday in May – in order to extend the

harvest into late summer and fall.

Changing the Definition of “Garden”

Social media has brought attention to the ongoing trend of “ornamental edibles,” with photos of lettuce, herbs and chard used as bedding plants, climbing beans and vining squash covering arbors and statuesque beauties like artichoke and lacinato kale as focal points.

Sites like Pinterest inspire seasoned gardeners and newbies alike to think beyond row gardens with photos of balcony, patio, rooftop and frontyard vegetable gardens.

Support this trend with photos of mature vegetable plants, pretty pink and white Swiss chard ‘Peppermint’ for example, to help customers understand the best place to grow them.

Supplying these outside-the-box gardens can be a little different but isn’t difficult. Traditionally the best vegetable plants were stout, bright green and leafy.

Top left: Ornamental edibles and mixed containers make vegetables shine. Top right: Collard 'Flash' is packed with vitamins. Bottom left: Raised beds define a new vegetable gardener. Bottom right: Turnip 'Market Express' is one of the least wasteful foods.



For an ornamental garden, many attributes contribute to a plant's value: leaf shape, texture and color.

Does the plant flower? Are the flowers attractive? A big, graceful, spreading plant habit can be a selling point.

Scent and sound come into play. For example, corn plants make a lovely rustling sound on breezy days and can be used to screen an unwanted view.

Eggplants, artichokes and okra have beautiful flowers.

The fruit of pepper and tomato plants come in many shades that can complement a color scheme.

Bulk Up on Herbs

That cute little pot of herbs mentioned earlier will garnish cocktails, but your serious cooks are going to need more volume.

Sell basil, parsley and the best cilantro out there: Santo, in 3-packs or 6-packs.

The average pesto recipe calls for 4 cups of basil leaves, but buying this much basil in the grocery store may cost more than the accompanying bottle of wine.

Cooks need to know they will have to have multiple herb plants to support some recipes – not only pesto, but also parsley and mint for tabbouleh, cilantro for salsa and dill for pickling.

A photo or mature display plant will drive the message home.

Some other important herbs to offer in large volumes include oregano, thyme and chamomile.

As gardeners become more competent in the kitchen or cooks become more competent in the garden, they find themselves preserving the bounty – through drying, or canning, pickling or making soup stock.

All of these activities require lots of herbs, so the more plants they buy the better.

Smart Foods

Sweetness, flavor and beauty only go so far.

Customers are looking for nutrition these days – just look at the overnight popularity of kale!

Carry vegetables that are naturally healthy: Kale, collards and broccoli are all packed with vitamins.

In both gardening and eating, color variation equals well-balanced nutrition. Plants with a variety of colors – red, purple, orange and green – will support a healthy garden and diet.

Look for fruit colors such as pink, red and purple in tomatoes and peppers, root color in carrots and beets and leaf color in collards, mustards, kale and turnips.

Several vegetable breeding companies have come out with high-nutrition varieties in the last few years. Nutrition-savvy customers will be looking for increased vitamin C or beta-carotene.

According to the American Heart Association website, "One of the best reasons to include fruits and vegetables [in a diet] is not just their antioxidants, but because they also contribute a number of important nutrients that most people don't get enough of, including folate, magnesium, potassium and dietary fiber, as well as vitamins A, C and K. And they are naturally low in saturated fat and calories."



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EDIBLE GARDENING



Cherry tomato 'Red Robin' and other tomato and pepper plants can complement a color scheme and provide unmatched nutrition.

Waste Not, Want Not

Another trend to look for is that of reducing food waste. The next generation of gardeners is concerned about the planet and making the best use of resources.

Vegetable gardening reduces food miles (distance food travels from field to table) and can educate adults and children about where their food comes from.

Many have embraced composting, either at home or in municipalities. Compost makes new soil out of food scraps, a beautiful process for sure, but why not reduce those scraps?

The turnip or the beet present arguably the least wasteful foods on the planet. Beet and (some) turnip greens are tasty in salads and soups; the peels and stems can go into soup stock, and the roots can be cooked and eaten.

Not all edibles are, well, so edible, but there are great ways to make the most with the available garden space.

The edible plant breeding industry thinks about space and productivity a lot. They call plant productivity "yield."

A big hearty tomato plant is not really exciting unless it is going to produce (yield) a bunch of tomatoes. When choosing plants for the garden center, look for varieties that offer high yield or fruit per plant.

This applies not only to the more obvious numbers of tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers or melons, but also to greens. Collard 'Flash' and 'Tiger' are new varieties selected to regrow quickly after the leaves are harvested, boosting yield over the season.

Gardening for Pollinators

Bees have been in the news lately, and not in a good way. Many of the pollinators we depend on for commercial production of tree fruit, nuts and vining crops have been dying off in recent years.

The good news is that urban and suburban areas can offer a haven for some types of pollinators.

There are many ways to encourage pollinators in the garden. Garden centers can offer plants that attract pollinators. Many edibles require insect pollination, so be sure those customers picking up vegetable plants are offered some flowering plants as well.

Gardeners growing edibles should be encouraged to let some vegetables go to seed at the end of the season – both as an educational exercise and as a way to attract insects.

Encourage customers to include both vegetables and ornamental flowering plants in all their garden spaces.

Here's to a warm and productive 2015! Let's get everyone outdoors and planting something. **LGR**

Heather Kibble is the manager of Sakata Home Grown, a division of Sakata America. Sakata Home Grown supplies vegetable seed wholesale to companies who supply home garden and farmer's market growers. She serves as vice president on the board of the National Garden Bureau and has worked in the vegetable seed industry for 19 years. She lives, works, gardens and cooks in California and can be reached at hkibble@sakata.com.

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