

Vegetables as Ornamentals

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This guide explores the landscaping and color options available by using fruits as ornamentals.

Many vegetables have ornamental as well as food value, and can be used as ornamentals where space for a traditional food garden is limited. They also can be incorporated as plantings in decorative containers on porches, patios and decks — even in small spaces such as apartments. They have ornamental value in the garden, and in the home, as colorful or unusual decorations in conjunction with floral arrangements.

- Use leafy vegetables, radishes, and low-growing herbs as edible edgers in flower beds, or as textural interest in containers.
- Tuck vegetables into annual or perennial beds or add them to shrub borders. Annual flowers can then fill gaps left by harvesting early vegetable crops.
- Decorate fences, trellises and posts with vining vegetables or train the vines to climb stakes in containers.
- Plant a narrow, double row of ornamental corn to create an unusual temporary fence.
- Bush-type cultivars of many vegetables are available and quite useful in containers and small spaces.

Only your imagination limits the use of vegetables as ornamentals.

The proper site is essential for success. It should be well-drained with good fertility and adequate sunlight specific to each plant type. Most vegetables prefer 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight each day. Containers can be filled with plants suited to nearly any location and can be moved to take advantage of suitable environmental conditions.

Perennial Vegetables

Vegetables can be classified as perennials or annuals. The most commonly grown perennial vegetables in Nebraska are asparagus and rhubarb. The purple spears of ‘Purple Majesty’ asparagus add an unusual color and form to the garden. Allowing the fronds of asparagus to stand through the growing season adds fine texture and height

to the garden, with the added bonus of gold fall color. Asparagus ferns provide a soft, airy background to set off flowering plants.

Rhubarb contributes bold-textured foliage that remains visible during the entire growing season. Cultivars with deep red stems and midribs are available and add a colorful accent to the garden. Both asparagus and rhubarb require full sun and well-drained soil. Place them in locations where they will not be disturbed during garden preparation. If given proper conditions, these vegetables will live and produce for years. **Caution:** Rhubarb leaves, while pretty, are poisonous. The stalks are fine to eat, however.

Annual Vegetables

Annual vegetables introduce a variety of colors and shapes to the garden. Gardeners can choose different types each year to not only add interest but change the appearance of their garden and the bounty on their table.

Beans

Scarlet runner beans are often located with flower seed in garden stores as well as in seed catalogs. Although they are grown for their showy red flowers, the pods are edible. Harvested regularly, the plants will continue to flower for most of the growing season. Runner beans should be grown on a trellis and can provide shade for a patio or porch. The vines can be removed after frost to let the winter sun shine through.

There are also bush beans with ornamental characteristics. ‘Royal Burgundy’ and ‘Royalty’ bear dark-purple pods which also turn green when cooked. There are hundreds of old and new cultivars of dry beans with a multitude of seed colors and color patterns. While the plants are not necessarily ornamental, storing the seed in clear jars can add color to the kitchen.

Eggplant

Eggplant fruit comes in many shapes, sizes and colors, ranging from the miniature pure white of ‘Easter Egg’ to violet, purple or lavender Italian cultivars, and traditional dark black-purple American cultivars. Forms range from

egg-shaped to almost cylindrical. Specialty seed catalogs are good sources for unusual eggplant cultivars.

Kale

Flowering kale prefers cool growing conditions and does well when planted in mid to late summer. Its colors intensify as fall temperatures drop. It is typically used as an edger or ornamental texture plant in containers. Green outer leaves surround white or reddish-purple, crinkled, inner leaves, making the entire vegetative plant look like a large flower. Many garden centers carry flowering kale plants in late summer.

Leaf Lettuce, Spinach, and Mustard

Most leafy vegetables grown as ornamentals perform best in cooler conditions and will tolerate cooler soils than those needed for warm-season vegetables. This makes them very useful as early season extenders. They can also be planted as a fall crop, taking the place of summer annuals or hiding the gaps left by removal of other vegetables. Check seed packets for days to maturity and compare that against the average hard freeze date for your location to determine your best fall planting date.

Leaf lettuces, spinach and mustard are usually grown as early spring or late summer-to-fall crops and are replaced with other vegetables or annual flowers after they have passed their peak performance. Lettuce and spinach will become bitter and bolt (go to seed) when days lengthen and the weather turns warm. Look for lettuce cultivars with curly leaves, red coloration or deeply lobed foliage. Lettuce mixes can be very ornamental, containing a variety of different textures, sizes, and colors. These mixes may also contain radicchio, endive, and other edible greens.

Spinach is available with large, flat leaves or with glossy leaves that are deeply wrinkled, or savoyed. The savoy-type spinaches are quite ornamental but harder to clean for eating.

Mustard can get fairly large. Cultivars with red leaves or green leaves with red margins are commonly grown. Mustard will withstand warmer temperatures for a longer time than lettuce or spinach before it bolts.

Okra

Although okra isn't as common in the Great Plains as it is in southern states, it will perform well if given full sun, good soil, and adequate water. The 2- to 3-inch pale yellow flowers of this plant from the mallow family are ornamental in their own right. Cultivars with red pods or reddish foliage can be found. The pods are attractive in dried arrangements.

Ornamental Corn

Ornamental corn can be grown both for stalk color and decorative ears (*Figure 1*). Gardeners can find many cultivars with wide variations in ear size and color. Small strawberry popcorn ears

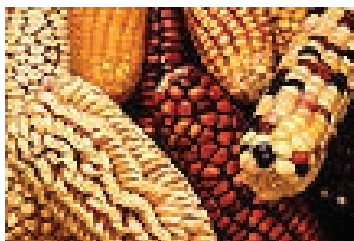


Figure 1. Ornamental corn offers variety in both ear color and size.

and miniature corn in a variety of colors can be used in wreaths and arrangements. Plant ornamental corn in unusual patterns rather than rows or blocks, or use it as a temporary fence. The husks of the heirloom variety 'Bloody Butcher' are dark red, as are the kernels. Isolate individual cultivars of ornamental corn from one another and from sweet corn to prevent cross-pollination.

Peppers

The number of sweet and hot pepper cultivars with ornamental value has increased substantially in recent years (*Figure 2*). The dark green foliage of sweet peppers contrasts with fruit colors such as lilac, green, white, brown, orange, yellow, and red. 'Jingle Bells' sweet peppers are bite-sized morsels in hot colors. Hot peppers come in a variety of shapes and colors, from long and pointed to round. Some peppers are sold specifically as ornamental plants, often as potted plants. The fruits of these plants are edible, although usually extremely hot and often bitter so be cautious in eating them. The All American Selection 'Black Pearl' has perfectly round black peppers on dark purple foliage. Peppers need full sun and consistent moisture for best production and color development.



Figure 2. Ornamental peppers need full sun and consistent moisture for best production and color development.

Swiss Chard and Beets

Swiss chard has bright and distinct ribbed leaves with stems that vary in color from red to yellow, making them an excellent ornamental vegetable. The bright crimson stalks of rhubarb chard have crinkled, dark-green leaves with red veins. Seeds can be started indoors for early planting, or small plants can be purchased at garden centers. Chard tolerates cold weather and frost as well as hot summer days. If the foliage becomes tattered, rejuvenate the plants by cutting off the foliage a few inches above the ground. New leaves with a more delicate flavor than the old ones will quickly be produced. 'Bright Lights' produces plants with petioles and midribs in cream, salmon, orange, pink and red.

While most people grow beets for the edible root, the tops are also edible and can be quite ornamental. 'Bull's Blood' has deep red foliage that creates interest in borders and in salad bowls.

Sweet Potatoes

Ornamental sweet potatoes have increased in use the last few years, mainly as container plants. They can be used in window boxes, in patio pots, hanging baskets, in large outdoor planters and as ground covers. They are valuable because of their trailing vines with lime-green, purple and multicolored foliage. They can be used alone or in mixed

container plantings. Sweet potatoes are not winter-hardy but can be purchased each year or started from cuttings.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes are available in a wide range of colors (red, orange, yellow, pink, green, and burgundy) and in many sizes and shapes. Interest in heirloom tomatoes and tomatoes with different shapes and colors has spurred demand for these older or unusual cultivars. Determinate, or bush, tomato plants are attractive when grown in large containers and grow shorter with concentrated fruit set. They need smaller cages/stakes or can be grown without support.

Indeterminate, or vine-type, tomato plants usually yield larger, more perfect fruit over a longer period if supported in a cage or staked and pruned. Caging allows the fruit to be seen, providing red or orange flashes through the leaf canopy, and keeps the fruit off the ground. The indeterminate vines of grape tomatoes and many cherry or pear tomatoes continue to spread throughout the season, with terminal clusters of oval to round fruits. Dwarf indeterminate plants are naturally small, but set fruit throughout the growing season. Choose disease-resistant cultivars to produce quality fruit and to maintain a pleasing appearance of the plants.

Squash, Gourds, Pumpkins and Cucumbers

Vine crops, including squash, gourds, pumpkins and cucumbers, can be grown on trellises, fences, stakes, or ornamental supports in containers. They can provide season shade for a patio or porch and can also be used as temporary screens. If you grow vines on a slanted support made from slats or 1 x 2 inch dimension lumber, cool season crops or flowers needing partial shade can grow underneath, resulting in a very efficient use of space. When grown on vertical surfaces, heavy vegetables such as pumpkins may need to be supported with slings to avoid breaking the vines.

Squash, gourds, pumpkins and cucumbers have lush foliage and showy blossoms, as well as interestingly shaped fruit (*Figure 3*). Plants with bush-type growth make nice specimen plants at the corner of a patio, yard, or building. Bush-type plants require less area than vining types, making them ideal

when space is limited, such as small spaces or containers.

While the lush foliage and showy flowers of these vine crops add bold texture and some color to the garden, it's the fruit's interesting shapes and colors that attract the most attention. Winter squash, pumpkins, and gourds make colorful fall decorations, and most can be stored for cooking throughout the winter.



Figure 3. Pumpkins can lend some fall color to your yard.

Cross-pollination can produce either oddities or very beautiful fruits. Most vines also have large, quick-germinating seed, making them easy for children and beginning gardeners to grow. Vines may even spring from seeds of composted plants.

In Nebraska, viral diseases from squash vine borers, cucumber beetles, and squash bugs can be a problem. Inspect plants regularly to determine if insect control is necessary. Those infected with viruses or bacterial wilt should be pulled up and disposed of in the trash, not in the compost pile.

Amaranth

Amaranth is a dramatic and unusual annual grain that can be included in an ornamental vegetable planting. Its huge, pointed, rounded or feathery heads are orange, red, or green and its top bold foliage may also show these colors.

Table 1 contains a sampling of the many vegetable cultivars with ornamental value that have performed well in Nebraska. Many others are available. Plants and seeds of unusual and ornamental cultivars may have limited availability at local garden centers. Mail order and on-line suppliers are often good sources for novelty types of vegetables and vegetable cultivars. Read the descriptions carefully to get the characteristics you are seeking, such as colorful fruit or foliage, compact growth habit, or days to maturity.

Table I. Vegetable cultivars with ornamental value that have performed well in Nebraska.		
<i>Vegetable</i>	<i>Cultivar</i>	<i>Description</i>
Asparagus	Purple Passion	Attractive purple spears, turn green when cooked
Beans	Royal Burgundy	Purple pods
	Royalty	Purple pods
Eggplant	Easter Egg	Small, white, egg-shaped fruit
	Ghostbuster	White fruit
	Little Fingers	Long, skinny, dark purple fruit
	Pumpkin on a Stick	Small pumpkin-like fruits, spiny leaves
	Rosa Bianca	Violet and white fruit
Hot Pepper	Black Pearl	Small black fruit mature to bright red
	Chinese Five Color	Changes to 5 colors
	Copacabana	Very prolific and colorful
	Habanero or Scotch Bonnet	Hottest pepper available, has a unique fruity flavor
	Super Chile	Good for drying and decoration
	Turkish Orange	Tennis ball size, orange color
	White Bullet	Fruit turns green to gold to ivory white, 1" long
Lettuce	Red Sails	Leaf type, burgundy
	Revolution	Looseleaf, deep red foliage color

Table I. Vegetable cultivars with ornamental value that have performed well in Nebraska (continued).		
<i>Vegetable</i>	<i>Cultivar</i>	<i>Description</i>
Okra	Annie Oakley II	Compact plants, slender pods
	Burgundy	Burgundy pods
	Jade	Productive, early
Ornamental Corn	Baby Blue (mini)	Miniature ears, robin's egg blue
	Bloody Butcher	Husks and kernels red
	Carousel	Multicolored kernels
	Fiesta	Multicolored kernels, purple husks
	Seneca Red Stalker	Purple stalked plants
	Strawberry Popcorn	Small ears of red popcorn
Pumpkin	Baby Bear	Small, 4"-6" diameter
	Baby Boo	White skin, 3" diameter
	Bushkin	Short-vine plants, thick flesh
	Jack Be Little	Orange skin, 3" diameter
	Lumina	White pumpkins for painting or carving
	Spirit	Semi-bush jack-o'-lantern
	Triple Treat	Jack-o'-lantern with naked seeds
Rhubarb	Canada Red	Red stalks
	MacDonald	Bright red stalks
Summer Squash	Blondie Zucchini	Ivory colored zucchini
	Gold Rush Zucchini	Bright gold zucchini
	Multipik	Fruit are yellow from the time they are first formed
	Scallop Peter Pan	Hybrid green scallop fruit
	Seneca Hybrid Zucchini	Dark green zucchini
	Sunburst	Bright yellow scallop fruit
Sweet Pepper	Gypsy	Orange at maturity, 4" x 2½"
	Hungarian Sweet Wax	Blocky fruit, 2" x 4"
	Jingle Bells	1½" x 1½" fruit, color changes from green to red, good for containers
	Sweet Banana	5" x 1½" fruit, fruit light yellow, changing to red
	Sweet Cherry	Small fruit, red at maturity
	Tangerine Dream	Shiny red-orange, 3" fruit
Sweet Potato	Ace of Spades	Vine, dark purple heart-shaped leaves
	Blackie	Vine, dark purple, indented leaves
	Margarita	Vine, lemon-lime foliage
Swiss Chard	Bright Lights	Mixed colors
	Rhubarb Chard	Red stems, savoyed foliage
Tomato	Husky Cherry Red	Dwarf, indeterminate plants
	Husky Gold	Dwarf, indeterminate plants
	Husky Red	Dwarf, indeterminate plants
	Sungold	Clusters of very sweet, orange fruits
	Tumbler	Cascading, container plant, cherry-like fruit
Winter Squash	Cream of the Crop	Ivory colored acorn squash
	Orangetti Spaghetti	Golden orange spaghetti squash
	Turks Turban	Multi-colored edible fruits

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