

The Vegetable Patch Goes Luxe

Homeowners Hire Experts to Install Lavish Gardens; Why the Help Gets the Bounty

By Ellen Gamerman

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Home vegetable gardening is surging thanks to rising food prices and health scares with commercial supplies. But at the rarified end of this horticultural renaissance is a world of backyard produce that has more in common with designer boutiques than the local farm stand.



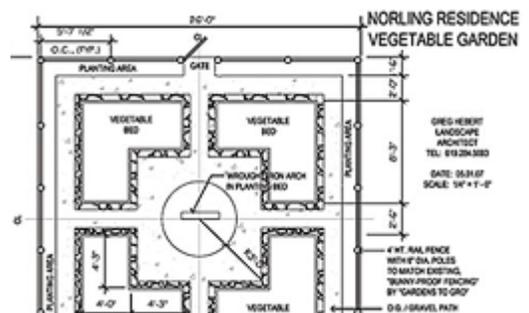
Some people are paying tens of thousands of dollars to have landscape architects design and install elaborate vegetable gardens. These homeowners regard their plots as edible showplaces, where they take guests on tours of manicured beds of baby bok choy and Japonica maize the way others show off their koi ponds and rose bushes.

But since many homeowners have these gardens installed at second homes they rarely visit, or are away from their garden for weeks while on vacation, the owners may not even be around to enjoy the bounty.

Rick Norling spent \$10,000 to have a vegetable garden created on his property in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., earlier this year. He turned to the elegant gardens at the French palace of Versailles to help inspire the plan that he and his designer put together. It features raised beds of haricot vert, squash and 12 varieties of heirloom tomatoes. But Mr. Norling, who is known for wowing dinner guests by drizzling truffle oil over homegrown lettuce, doesn't toil in the dirt every weekend. Before a recent three-week trip to China with his wife, Mr. Norling, the chief executive of the nonprofit-hospital alliance Premier, invited his landscaper to harvest the vegetables and eat them himself. "He thought it was real heaven," he says.

At Garden of Ideas, a landscape-design firm in Ridgefield, Conn., owner Joe Keller says he recently completed a \$60,000 garden at a weekend house in North Salem, N.Y. Mr. Keller says he tends the plots during the week, and the stable workers who care for the owner's horses often get the vegetables.

In Newport, R.I., landscape architect Kate Field says she is designing three times as many vegetable and herb gardens for luxury properties as a decade ago. Clients pay roughly \$50,000 for installations that feature distinctive touches -- such as granite-edged vegetable beds, fish ponds, sculptures and grapevines



Greg Hebert Landscape Architect

A blueprint that inspired Rick Norling's garden in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., was based in part on the gardens at the palace of Versailles in France.

wound like topiaries. Edible plants are arranged by color, height and texture, similar to the way garden designers lay out flowers and shrubs.

Clients' culinary tastes also influence garden installations. San Diego landscape architect Greg Hebert says the personal chef of one of his clients asked Mr. Hebert to include kaffir lime trees and lemongrass at the family's California property so they can enjoy homemade Thai meals when they aren't at their homes in Miami and New York City.



Peter Wynn Thompson/Getty Images for The Wall Street Journal

Maureen Carson of Golf, Ill., asked her husband for a vegetable garden for her 50th birthday. It cost about \$70,000.

Until recently, Maureen Carson had to roll back a chicken-wire fence to get to her vegetable garden in Golf, Ill. She spent hours on her hands and knees ripping out weeds and trying to control the oregano choking her tomatoes and rhubarb. As her 50th birthday approached, Dr. Carson told her husband, Robert, she didn't want a European vacation or diamonds. She wanted a professionally designed kitchen garden.

Last fall, Dr. Carson watched as a more than \$70,000 landscaping plan went into effect. Her landscaper, Craig Bergmann Landscape Design in Wilmette, Ill., put in 14 raised beds lined with stone or cedar; three rustic wooden

gates; eight hazel-stem obelisks to support climbing vines; a gazebo; wooden fences that support apple and pear trees that are trained to grow flat; an irrigation system and a small orchard with plum, peach and cherry trees. But the designer left the vegetable beds empty, allowing Dr. Carson to plant whatever she pleased. "That's the fun part," she says.

Dr. Carson, an obstetrician-gynecologist, says the garden will help her fill the time while waiting for her patients to go into labor. The garden is so elaborate and satisfying that she and her husband have ditched plans for a pool or a second home. "Now we have this beautiful garden so there's never any reason to go anywhere else," she says.

Some real-estate agents say vegetable gardens are a selling point at upscale properties that can rank alongside Viking ranges and imported-tile baths. Connie Antoniou, a broker in North Barrington, Ill., recently showed a \$1.2 million house with a pool, but it was the vegetable garden that particularly caught the eyes of one couple. They "spent quite a bit of time" walking along it, Ms. Antoniou says. "It's an asset to the house." The family moved in two weeks ago.

High-end vegetable patches -- some call them by the French term "potager" -- are also becoming popular spots for entertaining. Lin Lavery, a recently elected town selectman, or council member, in Greenwich, Conn., says she plans to invite members of the town's environmental task force to her home for a dinner party this summer. Before she serves soup made with homegrown leeks, she'll give them a tour of her garden.

That wouldn't have happened four years ago, when Ms. Lavery was gardening in a former dog pen enclosed by a chain-link fence. Now, her garden sports stone and cedar fencing -- part of a \$15,000 landscaping job. She has planted six kinds of lettuce in a pattern using red and green leaves. She won't plant corn -- "It's messy," she says -- and favors organic vegetables with photogenic foliage, like asparagus, cabbage and eggplant. But she realizes vegetables aren't just for show. At parties, she often catches guests admiring her produce, and she knows what that means: "I say, 'Help yourself,' " she says.



Gerardo Somoza for The Wall Street Journal

Lin Lavery's vegetable garden in Greenwich, Conn., is so elaborate she gives guests tours - and lets them take produce.

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