

# Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

## *The Potager Kitchen Garden*

By Cynthia Brian

*“The miracle of the seed and the soil is not available by affirmation; it is only available by labor.” - Jim Rohn*

After two weeks of pulling weeds, hauling manure, spading, triple digging, and finally sowing seeds, my nails are nubs and my back is aching. Yet, I am exuberant for the harvest that will begin soon as a result of my newest experiment—planting my personal potager.

Potager is a French word for a manner of gardening mixing flowers with vegetables, fruit, berries, and herbs in a formal style. If you want fresh, succulent, and abundant produce straight from the garden to the table, planting a potager is the smartest garden practice to adopt.

Americans are used to planting vegetable gardens, the English plant kitchen gardens, and the French have potagers. Since the Middle Ages, the French have been combining anything they want for decor or culinary delights in one garden plot. The advantage of a potager is that this type of cultivating is ideal for any plot size. It saves space, nutrients, and water, all the while adding a bountiful beauty to your landscape. A glorious Renaissance chateau in France, Villandry, is considered one of the world’s most famous potagers with acres of formal beds divided into nine equal squares, edged with boxwood and changed seasonally. Artichokes, leeks, cabbages, pumpkins, peppers, beets, Swiss chard, squash share space with roses, nasturtiums, catmint, marigolds, and violas. The plan has been replicated and copied all over the globe.

Potagers are mostly filled with annuals as opposed to permanent plantings of perennials to allow for rotation and choice. The secret is to blend plants that are edible or are useful as natural pest and insect resistors. When creating your



*Leeks and cabbages are the stars of the kitchen potager.*



*The magnificent formal potager at Chateau Villandry in France with purple kale, tree roses, and peppers edged with clipped boxwood.*

*Photos Cynthia Brian*

Lamorinda potager, start by drawing a design for the beds. A central focal point such as a small tree, decorative frame, a bean teepee, or a dramatic plant such as a globe artichoke sets the stage. The pattern is more effective when you plant generously for an opulent outcome while choosing specimens carefully. Each vegetable, herb, berry, fruit, or flower is meant to shine individually while complementing the looks or habits of its neighbors. Aim for symmetry and balance, planting in patches or clumps as opposed to rows.

I bordered my terraced potager with sunny colored calendulas, also known as pot marigolds, using the bright orange petals in salads for a fresh snappy taste, and in cooking as a poor man’s saffron. Armenian cucumbers are being trained on a tripod I made from pear tree trimmings along with scarlet runner beans. Two large artichokes anchor one corner of the potager where fennel, parsley, and onions nestle beneath the large fronds. A dwarf volunteer apple tree

(with the most delicious crunchy apples) proudly grows on the other side planted with sprawling strawberries, mounds of potatoes, squares of basil and beets. Once sprouted, peppery nasturtiums will spill over the raised edges meeting the thyme growing between the steppingstones, the hues mingling boldly with the variety of lettuces, carrots, spinach, and eggplant. Seven varieties of grapes are trellised along the fence with rosemary as ground cover and black currants as end pillars.

Tomatoes, jalapenos, and white corn will dominate the sunniest spots with sunflowers standing guard.

The patchwork of legumes, vegetables, herbs, flowers, and fruit engaged in a system of succession sowing is decorative in shape, form, color, and texture while being functional in providing quantities of the freshest produce throughout the year. The key element to the high drama of a potager is to create a plan for what you enjoy, then, dig in.