

## Gardening for Food: Perennials

### By Marlys Bell

Last week's gardening column explored growing some of your own food in the form of seasonal vegetables. This week we will discuss some of the more permanent types of food plants and ways they can be grown. To get the maximum yield, nutrition and enjoyment from the edible garden, these are some tips to consider.



*Fotolia blueberry*

#### Where:

For those with some space and patience, the menu can be broadened from annual warm and cool-season vegetables to include seasonal treats like strawberries, blueberries, rhubarb, asparagus, apples and cherries. For those with existing landscaping, many edible perennial plants such as strawberries, rhubarb, blueberries, fruit trees and fennel are attractive enough to be included in the landscaping.

Perennials such as asparagus, berries, rhubarb, fruit trees and many herbs do not need to be grown in raised beds as long as they are not disturbed and there is good drainage. Containers planted with dwarf varieties of favorite fruits and vegetables could provide additional gardening space. For example, I keep a Meyer's lemon tree just outside my kitchen door for easy access to the fruit.

#### How:

**Organic:** Many gardeners believe that in order to achieve maximum health benefits, committing to organic methods is necessary. That means avoiding synthetic herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers and other potentially harmful practices.

Successfully growing edibles organically depends upon several steps. Start with soil amended with organic matter such as leaves, manure, and compost. The next step utilizes planting strategies that get maximum yield with a minimum amount of space while producing beneficial relationships among plants. Consider incorporating the permaculture principle of "layering" – planting shorter, smaller plants under taller plants such as fruit trees.

Another important step is including flowers and herbs to attract pollinators and beneficial bugs which make the garden more beautiful, healthy and productive. Ladybugs, praying mantis, lacewings, assassin bugs and many others will take care of the bad bugs such as aphids, whiteflies, cabbage loopers and other pests. To attract good bugs plant dill, fennel, tansy, cleome, cosmos, coneflower, nasturtiums, and zinnias.

Pay attention to soil replenishment between crops. Crop rotation for those plants that are less permanent is an important step in controlling pests and disease. Since some crops benefit from a 3-4 year rotation cycle, plant in a new spot each year, returning to the original

planting area in the fourth year. For plants like blueberries that prefer more acidic soil, a simple soil test kit can be purchased at your favorite garden supply store.

For those interested in learning more about food gardening, visit the Master Gardener Demonstration Garden on Saturday, May 5 from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at 251 S. Barretta Street in Sonora, the Cassina High Campus. Master Gardeners will demonstrate summer veggie gardening, answer questions about landscape grasses and host a plant sale. It is not too late. You can start growing your food today.

*Marlys Bell is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County who is using her property to demonstrate how to live “more green” by growing more fruits and vegetables.*

*UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: [http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master\\_Gardeners/](http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/) You can also find us on Facebook.*