



edible gardening Advocate

An early champion of mingling edibles and ornamentals, Rosalind Creasy is pleased to see the concept gaining popularity in American gardens.

BY ANNE RAVER

I WAS GOBBLING blackberries in Rosalind Creasy's garden one evening last July after offering to gather enough for dessert. The thornless variety, 'Black Satin', gave her 50 pints of plump, juicy, unbelievably delicious berries one summer. After all, this is Los Altos, California, 40 miles south of San Francisco. It's USDA Hardiness Map Zone 9B and Sunset Zone 14, where winter temperatures rarely fall below 25 degrees. "But the nights are cool, so we can't grow 'Brandywine' tomatoes," Creasy points out.

Poor dear. The queen of edible landscapes had tempted me out from muggy, stink-bug-infested Maryland with a photo of her artichokes in bloom. "I had so many I was sick of them and let them go to flower," she wrote. Reading her e-mail, I could just imagine the Cheshire cat grin on her face.

Rosalind Creasy, above, has seamlessly integrated edible and ornamental plants throughout her California garden, including along the front walkway, top.



Statuesque kale plants combine with diminutive flowering twinspurs (*Diascia* sp.) in this container.

Creasy, of course, is the woman who, back in the 1970s, ripped up her front lawn and started growing lemon and grapefruit trees, eggplants and heirloom tomatoes, colorful beds of mesclun and freckled lettuce among the nasturtiums and flaming red crocosmias.

She has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to gardening trends. Her first book, *The Complete Book of Edible Landscaping*, was published by Sierra Club

Books in 1982, decades before the more recent veggies-instead-of-lawn brand of activism became popular.

Not only did Creasy counsel growing food instead of turfgrass—without pesticides, of course—she helped popularize the idea of designing with edibles. Sure, Victory Gardeners had grown nearly half the country's produce in the 1940s. And the hippies in the 60s were growing corn and beans in the front yard.

What made Creasy different is that she inspired gardeners by showing us how to replace a ratty hedge with espaliered fruit trees, beds of impatiens with herb gardens of striking colors and shapes, water-guzzling lawns with terraces, changes in grade, and winding paths.

Creasy's much revised 2010 edition of *The Complete Book of Edible Landscaping*, filled with sumptuous color photographs, goes far beyond that first book, with its funky drawings and raised beds of vegetables. Here a mown path curves through a field of wheat—Creasy grew enough in her front yard one year to bake 10 loaves of bread with the neighborhood kids. It reveals her eye for striking juxtapositions—the vermillion stems of Rainbow chard rising above rambling Pink Wave petunias, spiky cardoon blossoms lounging over rough-hewn cobblestones. Other scenes reflect her constant travels to other gardens: the prairie natives in David Cavagnaro's fruit garden in Decorah, Iowa; the ebullient self-seeding annuals of Dean Riddle's four-square plot in the Catskills of Upstate New York.

This edition packs some 40 years of her gardening experience into an "Encyclopedia of Edibles" over 100 pages long, with mouth-watering photographs, and explains how to grow, harvest, and cook everything from an almond to a yam.

"She is Alice Waters' spiritual sister, with dirtier nails," says Thomas C. Cooper, a former editor of *Horticulture* magazine," linking her with another well known California foodie, the founder of Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley.

If she didn't invent the phrase—"edible landscaping"—she has been its "great publicist," says Roger Swain, the biologist and writer who hosted *The Victory Garden* on PBS for more than 20 years. "She understands color and beauty and design and takes the palette of vegetables that exist and displays them with eye-capturing glory."

FEAST FOR THE SENSES

My own favorite of Creasy's writings—she has published 18 books, and counting—is *Cooking from the Garden* (Sierra Club Books, 1988), in which she joyfully explores gardens around the country, from the baked bean gardens of New England to the chili gardens of the South-

west and many ethnic gardens of Americans with a yen for foreign flavors.

So it's more than wonderful to find myself grazing in Creasy's blackberry patch at sunset amid the low-throated chortle of her chickens.

The spicy scent of a climbing rose, with double peachy pink flowers, wafts across the brick path. "That's Polka, my favorite of all my roses," says Creasy, as she stands pondering the height of kiss-me-over-the-garden-gate (*Polygonum orientale*), an heirloom annual with chains of delicate pink flowers that hang from arching branches on a thick stalk the size of a small tree. "I'm wondering whether to take it down or not, or would some colored wire make it look more like a sculpture?"

Touring the garden, I notice a pomegranate tree, whose bright green bulbous fruits are just emerging from ruby-red flower petals. "That's 'Utah Sweet', which has pink fruit, not red, and sweeter than the one you get in the store," Creasy says. "And its foliage turns flaming yellow in the fall."

In a little plot of popcorn, grown for the local kids, each stalk rises out of the square of a blue-green painted wooden trellis that Creasy has placed horizontally, about six inches off the ground, to keep the corn from flopping over as it grows. This simple device, attractive yet functional, is one of her many ways to bridge the divide between the vegetable and ornamental garden. "People are gardening with edibles the same way the farmer has



Creasy loves to share her passion for gardening, here offering tips to some neighborhood kids.

been farming for years. We need to come up with different ideas," she says.

Creasy identifies a tomato, which is so dark purple, I thought it was an egg-

plant, as 'Indigo Rose'. "Jim Myers at Oregon State came up with it, and it has more anthocyanin, like blueberries, and more nutrition," she says. Its dark green leaves and dark fruit look fabulous growing up a red tower. And they are set off even more by a little forest of five-foot dahlias, the color of vermilion, with blood-red stems.

Then there are the herbs I had never tasted before. These include a chive from Mongolia, with a deep, but mellow taste. Creasy got the seeds from Seed Savers Exchange, the heirloom seed organization of which she is a board member. "It's a much prettier flower, too, and it doesn't flop," she says. Mexican culantro, which looks like a narrow-leafed lettuce but tastes like cilantro. Only this one doesn't hurry to go to seed; it will keep coming back if you nip off its tiny white flowers. Sesame looks like a kind of foxglove, with its demure tubular flowers; its leaves taste better than the more familiar seeds.

Rosalind Creasy's Books

Here are a few of Rosalind Creasy's gardening and cooking books. For a complete list, visit her website (www.rosalindcreasy.com).

Blue Potatoes, Orange Tomatoes: How to Grow a Rainbow Garden. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, California, 1994.

The Complete Book of Edible Landscaping. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, California, 2010.

Cooking from the Garden, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, California, 1988.

Rosalind Creasy's Recipes From the Garden, Tuttle Publishing, North Clarendon, Vermont, 2008.

Resources

Common Sense Pest Control (3rd edition) by Sheila Daar and Helga and William Oikowski. Taunton Press, Newtown, Connecticut, 2013.

Rebugging Your Home & Garden: A Step-by-Step Guide to Modern Pest Control by Ruth Troetschler. PTF Press, Los Altos, California, 1996.

Tucked into pots and growing in drifts in low borders, these plants lead my nose and hand down brick paths, under leafy arbors—laden with oranges, or apples, or hops blossoms (“I’m going to make beer,” says the irrepressible Creasy), sometimes sinking my teeth into a fruit I can’t resist, such as ‘Pink Pearl’, an 1800s apple that not only has a blush-pink skin, but is pink inside and crunchy-sweet-tart.

A ‘Fuyu’ persimmon grows next to ‘Pink Pearl’. “It’s a crispy one,” she says. “I like to have it for Thanksgiving, cut in wedges and wrapped in prosciutto.”

ESCAPING THE PESTICIDE CYCLE

When Creasy and her husband, Robert, and their two small children moved here in 1968, this fertile oasis was just lawn with a fruitless mulberry—still here, with baskets of fuchsias hanging from its branches—and a handful of apricot trees that were all that was left of a former apricot orchard.

The subdivision’s landscaping was anchored by bentgrass and hybrid tea roses. And despite the influence of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which came out in 1962, the Creasys’ neighbors were still pouring pesticides on their lawns. “The chemical movement was in full flower,” she says. “The woman who sold us the house said, ‘Here is the name of the people who spray,’ and the guy would come in and fog the whole yard.”

She kept her children, Bob, then six and Laura, three, indoors for a day or two after each spraying. “But it gave me the creeps,” she said. So she started floating the idea of not spraying. “Everybody said, ‘If you stop, everything will be flooded with insects.’”

Everybody, that is, except Ruth Troetschler, a biologist and Audubon activist, who lived at the end of her street. “She said, ‘Oh, you’ll get a lot of aphids, but they’ll finally settle down,’” recalls Creasy. “Put in lots of flowers, for the beneficials.” Troetschler would eventually summarize her philosophy in *Rebugging Your Home & Garden: A Step-by-Step Guide to Modern Pest Control*, published in 1996.

When Creasy stopped spraying, it was the beginning of what would become a lifelong obsession to change the face of the American landscape, and maybe our diets, as well.

GROWING UP GARDENING

Actually, the roots of that obsession may go even further back, to her childhood in Needham, Massachusetts. When Creasy was five, her father gave her a plot for her very own garden. “Some lima bean seeds, tomato plants, strawberry runners,” she remembers. “And no rules or anything like that.” She moved things around so much, like furniture in her dollhouse, nothing had a chance to put down roots. “I never harvested anything,” she says. But she loved being outside, where her

of Monet’s garden,” she says—but a nod to Isabella too.

Another influence on Creasy’s worldview came via her husband, Robert, who died in 2005. A physicist and computer wizard for IBM, Robert’s work took him around the world. His young wife accompanied him—to Cairo, Hong Kong, Milan, Rome, Jerusalem, and many other places—and nosed around the markets while he was immersed in software and machines. “By dinner time, everybody was tired of computers, and I’d say some-



In a border around the front of Creasy’s home, herbs, vegetables, and ornamentals of varying heights and textures mingle companionably.

father was relaxed. “So I associate gardening with a warm, wonderful feeling.”

She went to college at Simmons in Boston, where her classroom building was next to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. And she liked to study in the courtyard to the sound of the water and some music student playing harp or piano. “It smelled of those trailing nasturtiums, in the middle of winter,” she said. “It was heaven.” In her current garden, nasturtiums climb on a pergola she made of galvanized pipe painted aqua—“my version

thing like, ‘I saw these fava beans with pink flowers, and they say they eat the stalks! Do you eat the stalks?’ And soon people would be talking about how their mother or grandmother cooked them.”

Traveling helped her realize how few choices Americans had at their produce markets. For example, “We think pomegranates are red inside, but some are black, some are yellow, others are orange and pink and white,” she says. “Americans have selected their fruit for its size and color.”

CRITICAL THINKING

Once her children were in school, Creasy went back herself—to Foothill Community College in Los Altos Hills, California, to study horticulture and landscape design.

Her studies further convinced her to embrace the work-with-nature philosophy, but she began to question some of its folk myths, such as marigolds repel bugs. “People who knew something

about entomology would roll their eyes,” Creasy says. “So while it did a great thing for waking up gardeners, it was an emotional issue, not science-based.” Creasy points out that some marigolds do repel soil-borne nematodes, through compounds exuded from their roots, but not all. It’s the nectar and pollen produced by this composite’s flowers, Creasy says, that attract beneficial insects which help control pests.



Creasy regularly consults on edible landscaping projects, including one at Powell Gardens in Kansas City, Missouri, top, and at the New York Botanical Garden, above.

Since her husband was rubbing shoulders with scientists almost daily at Stanford University, every time she had a question, he would find an expert who could answer it. She met Sheila Daar and Helga and William Olkowski, at the Bio-Integral Resource Center in Berkeley. They were developing techniques for Integrated Pest Management (IPM), which would later be explained in their book, *Common Sense Pest Control* (see “Resources,” page 36).

In those days, pesticides like DDT were still seen as harmless. But Creasy, who was working with the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters on cleaning up the bay and polluted ground water, knew those chemicals were harming the environment. “I interviewed William Olkowski for a class presentation and the professor said, ‘Wow, you have the science to back it up’, and asked for the references.”

CONVERTING TO EDIBLES

Meanwhile, she had talked Robert into giving up a piece of the lawn—well, it was really the parking space. But it had been sprayed for so many years, it took a few more to cleanse the earth of pesticides. “I just threw in lots of compost and grew things I didn’t eat, like Shasta daisies,” says Creasy.

Once the pesticides had time to leach away, she started integrating edibles. “I grew artichokes and people would say, ‘What’s that beautiful flower?’ Then I put in peppers and nobody fainted.”

By the time she was working on *Cooking from the Garden* in the mid-1980s, she and Wendy Krupnick, who had worked with Alice Waters at Chez Panisse, trucked in tons of compost and Krupnick double-dug the whole front yard. They had to have room for experimenting with all those herbs and lettuces and heirlooms that hip Californians and seed savers across the country were starting to grow.

Creasy says she was having so much fun, she didn’t have time to process the fact that she was part of a sea change in gardening. Only in retrospect does she look back and say, “Wow, that was amazing. You’re just going day to day and putting in your two cents and experiencing things. You don’t say, ‘This is a



Lushly planted containers of ornamentals and edibles surround Creasy as she pots up some seedlings in her garden earlier this year.

movement.’ You respond to your environment, and that’s who you are.”

NO SLOWING DOWN

Creasy’s accomplishments as a writer, teacher, garden designer, and photographer are mind-boggling. She has been a guest on numerous radio and television programs, including *Good Morning America*. Her articles and photographs have been published in dozens of national gardening and cooking magazines, and she has served as a columnist for publications such as the *Los Angeles Times* and *Country Living Gardener*. In addition to many awards for her writing and photography—*The Complete Book of Edible Landscaping* has won several awards, including being named one of 75 Great American Gardening books by the American Horticultural Society in 1997—she was named to the Garden Writers Association’s Hall of Fame in 2009.

Now 74, Creasy still keeps a busy schedule lecturing and designing edible landscapes. In 2008, she designed a section of the Heartland Harvest Garden, a 12-acre edible garden created at Powell Gardens in Kansas City, Missouri. Recently she finished designing an edible garden for the Adobe Corporation headquarters in nearby San Jose.

Almost every week, some young couple calls to ask for help on bringing edibles into their yard. I ask her if food gardening is a fad that Gen X and Gen Y aren’t going to mess with, when after all, they can buy fresh organic produce at the farmer’s market? “It takes work, and I think young people are dismayed that it takes experience,” she says. “You’re not going to pick up an iPhone and see how to do it.”

But on the other hand, she has watched edibles settle into the landscape. “I don’t think we’re going to go back to people thinking edibles belong in the backyard,”

she said. After all, celebrities such as Alice Waters and First Lady Michelle Obama have helped make food gardens cool.

When people move into a new home, she hopes they will look around the yard, and think, where do I put the fruits, vegetables, and herbs? “The priority would be, ‘I grew up with this amazing hedge of blueberries’ and now I can have one,’ as opposed to ‘I grew up with a lawn, so now I have to have a lawn,’” she says. Growing and harvesting fresh food in your own garden is like opening Pandora’s box, she says. “Once you have fresh basil and arugula, you’re never going to go back.”

A longtime gardener who writes for the New York Times and Landscape Architecture magazine, Anne Raver lives on a family farm in Maryland. To view one of Rosalind Creasy’s recipes, click on the link to the Web Special on the AHS website.