

VEGETABLES IN THE BORDER

For me, no self-respecting cottage garden should be without its share of edible, yet highly decorative and architectural plants inhabiting the borders.

There are many popular vegetable varieties that are already common sights in gardens such as variegated brassicas – pretty to look at but invariably a disappointment on the plate in my opinion – edible thistles such as *Cynara cardunculus*, the globe artichoke, both green and purple and a statuesque giant for the back of a shady bed, the highly invasive but delicious *Helianthus tuberosus*, the Jerusalem artichoke. I have sown heirloom climbing beans with colourful flowers such as the runner bean Painted Lady with its red and white flowers and the wonderful purple flowered French bean, Cherokee Trail of Tears. Old-fashioned peas which will scramble to over two metres tall; varieties with purple flowers and pods like Kew Blue and Purple Podded another heirloom that is available to HSL members.

I am not adverse to scattering cut and come lettuce mixtures along the front of a border too, but old-fashioned English varieties like Bath Brown Cos look lovely and if you forget to pull them their flowering stems add more height and contrasts with clusters of white flowers shooting through the top of the plant.

However, there are three very special vegetables I will be adding to a new informal border. The first is a mange-tout I discovered in Laos. It grows in a most unruly fashion and can climb to three metres if left to its own devices. The blue flowers which fade to mauve as they set yield the most wonderful green pods with unbeatable flavour. A sunny wall, maybe scrambling through a spring flowering climber to give interest and food into late summer. Then there is *Raphanus caudatus* the sensationally named Rats Tail. This is a very old type of radish, grown not for its root but for its peppery seed pods which can grow to six inches in length. Allegedly favoured by royalty in the middle of the 19th century there are several varieties still grown but this radish, which was introduced from Java in Indonesia in 1815 has been the subject of fierce debate and squabbles by growers and explorers, especially from America, who have claimed it for themselves. The purple flowers fade to white as they set. The plants grow to about a metre high and have my favoured unruly habit. This is a gorgeous addition to any border where you want a striking annual that can stand proud amongst other medium sized plantings. Eat the thinnings as salad and grow on about a foot apart, then feast on the pods rather than woody roots in the heat of summer. Last but not least is *Oxalis Tuberosa*, or Oca as it is known in Africa and New Zealand - where I believe it is a popular vegetable – produces quantities of edible tubers in late autumn and early winter that keep well into spring. The plants grow as clumps and can be spaced just like potatoes. They have lovely yellow flowers in late summer and die back when the first hard frosts hit. The roots can be dug in November and December – a great time for clearing borders in any

event. The tubers, which look a little like Jerusalem artichokes have a nutty flavour and can be cooked just like potatoes – boiled, fried, roast, mashed.

Please email me if you would like some seeds of my cottage garden favourites.

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