



Stylish veggie garden

Raised beds add beauty and structure to a compact plot of edibles

BY SHARON COHOON PHOTOGRAPHS BY D.A. HORCHNER

THE SECRET to a successful kitchen garden—called a *potager* in France—is geometry. A convenient location helps too; to be useful, a potager needs to be near the kitchen, so fresh herbs for seasoning, leafy greens for salads, or ripe berries for dessert are close at hand. It also needs to look good—and not just in spring when plants are compact and tidy, but also in late summer when tomatoes and squash are in full sprawl.

The best way to meet all criteria is to contain the garden within a strong framework, as Mark Hershberger has done at his family's home in Jackson, Wyoming. Mark, a landscape architect, came up with a design for four square raised beds near an outdoor dining area, arranging them in a grid, which visually contains the messiness inherent in some crops. Each

bed measures 4 feet on each side; the straightforward layout couldn't be more traditional, but the construction and materials are novel.

Rustic materials, clean lines

For each bed, Mark sank four sturdy 6- by 6-inch posts about 1 foot into the ground to mark the corners. Then he stretched 4- by 4-inch square-grid wire fencing between the corner posts, securing the fencing to each post with nails, and framed the beds with 1- by 8-inch cedar boards. Finally, he lined the interior perimeters with dry-stacked stone and added stone paths between the beds.

The materials Mark used—ranch wire, locally quarried rock, and wood he painted barn red—place the potager firmly in its rural setting and complement the family

Four beds appear to rest on a larger square of rock pavers, centered on a still larger square of mown grass. The pretty pattern created by the cluster of raised beds laid out in a grid inspires the owners to sow seeds in tidy rows, to put crops such

as lettuces together that make sense visually as well as horticulturally, and to keep the soil mulched and weed-free. (In gopher country, it's a good idea to line the bottom of raised beds with hardware cloth.)

Garden | Solution



ABOVE The dining table adjacent to the kitchen garden is made from an old door, painted the same barn red as the raised beds; evenly spaced square pavers form a centerpiece. **LEFT** The beds' boards are nailed toward the top of the corner posts, while wire contains rock edging below the boards. **BOTTOM ROW** Carrots grow long and fat, thanks to their bed's rich soil; metal letters tucked into each bed indicate which family member tends it ("B" is for Bonny).



home (also painted barn red in some sections). The rock in the beds is the same stone used for the driveway, garden walls, and outdoor barbecue. "Everything flows together seamlessly," Mark says.

All in the family

Adding the potager was one of the first projects the Hershbergers took on when they moved into their new home, says Mark's wife, Bonny. Having grown up with a kitchen garden, she was eager for her kids, Jake and Lara, to share the joy she'd found in tending her crops. The children were young when the potager was built—6 and 5 respectively—so Bonny taught them how to plant quick crops such as radishes and child-pleasers such as carrots. Now the kids have license to grow whatever they want in their own raised beds, just as Bonny and Mark do in theirs. "Lara planted carrots in the shape of butterfly wings one year," Bonny says.

Bonny is a bit more pragmatic. Because Wyoming's growing season is short, she rules out crops that take longer than 70 days to harvest. Then she looks for a combination of tasty and pretty. Leaf lettuces always qualify, as do cilantro, parsley, radishes, and strawberries. And something vertical but not too rambunctious, such as snow peas, adds interest to the bed.

At the end of the season, Bonny adds garden debris to the compost and tills the soil. In winter when snow covers the boxes, their outline is still visible, still orderly. "Even then you can see the pattern," says Bonny, "and I love that."

From planning the garden in late winter, through the planting weekend in spring that has become a treasured family tradition, to harvesting crops for alfresco meals in summer, the Hershbergers' kitchen garden is very much a family affair.

INFO Design: Hershberger Design, Jackson, WY (307/739-1001). Resources: See page 162. ■

Why raised veggie beds work

SOIL AMENDMENT IS AFFORDABLE Food crops flourish best in neutral loamy soil, but most backyard soils are either too acid, too alkaline, too heavy, or too sandy. Trying to correct the soil chemistry of your entire property is usually an exercise in frustration (not to mention expensive). Adding compost or other amendments to a smaller, confined space to achieve better soil is doable, affordable, and rewarding.

SOIL TEMPERATURES CLIMB SOONER Raising soil above grade exposes it to sun from all sides, not just from above. So soil warms up more quickly and retains heat longer, which gives gardeners in cold climates a little more time to grow crops. Raised beds also help gardeners in cool coastal areas to grow tomatoes and other heat-loving crops more successfully.

WEEDING AND HARVESTING ARE EASIER Raised beds often measure 16 square feet for good reason: This size allows most adult gardeners to pluck weeds or harvest crops from the space without stepping in and compressing the soil. (If your children garden, add stepping-stones within the space, as the Hershbergers did.)