



NO BARE SOIL: THE COTTAGE GARDEN  
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Cottage gardens were first planted around 1400 by English peasants who were granted land outside a castle's protective walls and the lord's control. Limited space required the garden be utilitarian with only edible ornamentals, fruit trees (climate permitting), and herbs for cooking and medicines, packed closely in between the beehive (for sweetening), pig sty and chicken coop (meat, eggs and fertilizer). This small space was nurtured for the feeding and care of a family, and probably, a tithe for his lordship. Thus, necessity required an informal crowding of plants, a harmoniously useful mass rather than neat, spaced rows of segregated plants.

The cottage gardener was the first to discover companion planting - the concept of certain plants helping or hindering each other's growth, and the importance of pollinators. Later, when peasant life was romanticized, the cottage garden became less utilitarian and more ornate, including ornamentals like the peony, rose, and lilac, heavily fragranced and in homogenous pastels. But the look was the same: billowing, abundant growth, with plants close together.

The design elements of the modern cottage garden include:

- (1) Fences and gates, sometimes bent willow ("twig-like") in the English tradition, or sometimes white pickets, like a grandmother's garden, but all low and welcoming.
- (2) Close, curving paths so that you can garden within an easy reach, since cottage gardens are meant to be useful, not merely viewed from afar.
- (3) Multi-level planting. Examples would be clematis, foxgloves, hollyhocks, and delphiniums up high, hydrangeas, bower roses, and peonies to anchor the garden in back, salvia, phlox, columbines, true geraniums, calendulas and campanula in the middle, and violets, creeping thyme and mossy footstones at path-level.
- (4) The "architectural factor" inherent in certain foliage: large-leafed plants like Bear's breech (*Acanthus*) or the velvety leaflets of creeping thyme and everything in between, so that the cottage garden is interesting even out-of-bloom. Consider foliage color like the beautiful gray "ferny" leaf of *Artemisia* ('Powis Castle'), a Welsh wormwood.
- (5) Edible and useful plants--remember that a cottage garden's early purpose was to feed and cure the body with vegetables, herbs and medicinals. Espaliered apple, peach and pear trees can grow against a wall or to create a boundary fence. Or consider using a line of espaliered trees as a divider to provide shade.

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Remember to use organic fertilizers throughout if you intend to eat the products of your cottage garden. Hardy plants like catmint, Clary sage, rosemary, lavender, and coneflowers can grow forever if you deadhead them, nipping off the spent bloom, or allow them to go to seed, or if you pot cuttings for transfer. How about tucking in an eggplant or artichoke?

- (6) Decorative objects in restraint. Consider birdbaths, fountains, birdhouses, urns, or metal pails and tubs. In the true cottage garden, these are wood or metal (which weathers to a trademark patina).
- (7) Different blooming times for months of beauty. I have possibly the easiest cottage garden which was sown from “grandmother’s garden” and “wildflower garden” seed packets (hollyhocks, California poppies, cornflowers (*Centaurea cyanus*), phlox, cosmos, yarrow). In a spotlight of bright sun, the plants have seeded a second year, keeping the bees, butterflies and hummingbirds very happy, and they bloom in succession.

While a lovely hybrid tea rose can seem the essential cottage garden foundation plant, it might not be the best option. Known for gorgeous dense foliage and compact shape, hybrid teas need healthy exposure to sun and air at the plant base. These roses, when planted in a crowded cottage garden, may develop spindly, leafless branches reaching for the sun or diseases from humidity within that space. Instead, an old heritage rose that is segregated from the masses, growing up a boundary fence or “bowering” over the garden gate would be happier--perhaps the cascading softness of a cascading Cecile Brunner.

Like any other, cottage gardens need rich organic compost for soil health and undyed mulch to spread under the plant base, to keep the soil temperature steady, and to improve the soil as it breaks down. And what are the smart gardening lessons of the cottage garden? All that dense growth cuts down on weeds and the need for heavier mulch and watering. Due to the diversity of cottage garden plants, there is less potential of your garden’s “monoculture” (one type of plant) succumbing to diseases or pests.

There is much virtuous enjoyment in the cottage garden, knowing you are growing so much beautiful usefulness in a compact space and carrying on an historic tradition.

There are no Master Gardener classes for the remainder of July.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at [http://ucanr.edu/master\\_gardener\\_e-news](http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news). You can also find us on Facebook.