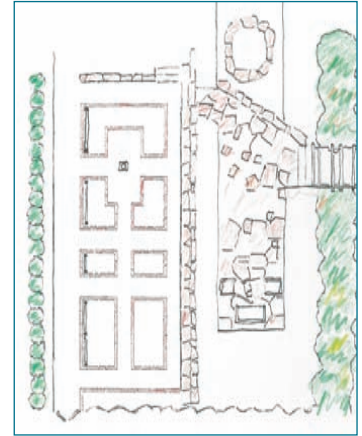


# PROPER *Potager*



*A veteran nursery owner finds unexpected beauty in a formal vegetable garden.*

Story and photos by Martin Stern

**G**ardens are ever changing, and gardeners adapt, season-by-season, to the nature of weather and time, to the processes of growth and decay. While adaptations are often minor—replacing a perennial or altering the shape of a bed—sometimes a complete overhaul may be necessary.

I was shocked when my partner, Richard Meacock, suggested that our well-intentioned prairie garden should be scrapped. Despite periodic flushes of splendor, the plantings had become unruly and impossible to maintain. He envisioned a formal vegetable garden instead, a *potager*, or kitchen garden, that would combine the pleasures of food and aesthetics.

With careful attention to using every square inch of the space, we began the design process. We measured the space and prepared a drawing to scale. A piece of trace paper was placed over the plot to see how the path and bed widths could play out. We decided that the best proportions to fit the space would be 3-foot-wide paths with beds 4 or 5 feet wide. Following these guidelines, Richard developed a series of bed shapes. The final and deceptively simple design (see drawing above) is a composition of interesting and varied bed shapes responding to the main axis of the existing paths and borders, backed by a series of trellises on the north side.

## Formal Style

The word *formal* is used to describe things that are done or made according to prescribed rules and does not necessarily imply something fancy or overdone. In formal gardens, regularity of line and proportion establish a sense of order and elegant simplicity. Clear edges, well-defined paths, accessible bed shapes and sizes typical of formal gardens make tasks, such as sowing, thinning, weeding, and harvesting, easier.

Formal garden style found its fullest expression in 17th-century France but was embraced by many in Europe, especially the English. Gardens (called *parterres*) of inconceivable scale, intricate ornamentation, and complex geometry were created for royalty. More modest forms of this style of garden were, and still are, created with the shared characteristics of being garden constructions on a level surface consisting of planting beds, edged in stone or tightly



After determining bed and path sizes, use a sod-kicker to remove grass.





August 2008 | Spring 2009



August 2008: The sundial provides a focal point for the garden in all seasons. Plants such as kale and chard add color and texture.

Spring 2009: Trellises add a vertical dimension and are covered with peas, beans, and cucumbers through much of the season.

clipped hedging, and gravel paths to form a pleasing, usually symmetrical pattern.

These features often (but not necessarily) occur in a *potager* as well. The form and beauty of a well-designed *potager* contrasts sharply with the standard perception of vegetable gardens as utilitarian and unsightly, and, therefore, best positioned in out-of-the-way places.

### Colors and Patterns

Shape is not the only element of beauty in a formal vegetable garden. The colors of broccoli, cabbage, and kale take on soft, glaucous blue tints, with pink or purple undertones. Scarlet runner beans are grown as ornamentals as well as for produce. The twining vines of peas are attractive in flower and fruit.

As interest in cooking and vegetable gardening burgeons, a multitude of unusual and beautiful novelties has

become available. Textured lettuces of rich hues; rainbow-colored peppers, beets, chard, and even carrots; and white and rosy eggplants imbue the garden and table with appealing color. To enhance the beauty of the garden, consider these foliar tints as well as patterns when planting.

Creating patterns with different plants in various configurations adds visual excitement to the *potager*. This can be as simple as laying out alternating rows of beets and lettuces or cabbages and carrots, for example. Planting in squares, diamonds, or other shapes will make more elaborate patterns. The addition of towers and trellises for vining plants, such as beans, cucumbers, and tomatoes, adds a vertical dimension. In our garden, a sundial is situated in the main axis with two low, glazed urns for herbs and a bench reminding us that, although time is passing, we also must rest and contemplate.

### Raising Vegetables, Formally

I embarked on preparing and planting with a sense of adventure, making decisions based on bits and pieces of information, folk knowledge, and hearsay absorbed through the years.

Thorough preparation always pays off. In early spring, the beds receive 8 inches of aged horse manure, worked in to a depth of 1½ feet. Although manure is the preferred amendment, compost is suitable. The beds are fertilized with Espoma Plant-tone®, an organic blend of rich nutrients, in late May, with another light application for high performers, such as tomatoes, in mid-June. Deep hand watering at soil level is done during dry periods.

Experimentation in the vegetable garden and the kitchen has taught me the best and worst crops. We sow early crops in favorable (is there such a thing?) weather in April. I have found snap peas and spinach easy to grow and





Summer 2009 | Fall 2009



Summer 2009: By midsummer, the garden is lush but still retains a neat appearance because of its formal architecture.

Fall 2009: The gardener's rewards include a lovely place to wander and an abundance of food to share with friends and family.

use. I am still experimenting with how to use the space left over when these crops finish producing in summer. This past year, I sowed melons in large plastic tubs and submersed them where the peas were with some success. (Squash or cucumbers may have been easier.) A thick planting of eggplants overcame the space the spinach had occupied.

As spring progresses, summer crops are either sown or planted in from starter plugs. In terms of reward for

effort, these are my favorites: broccoli, potatoes, onions, eggplant, chard, beets, green beans (haricots vert and runner beans), celeriac, chard, English cucumbers, and tomatoes (especially Black Plum). Mild to severe disappointment ensued when I attempted leeks, salsify, broad beans, and cauliflower. Second sowings of lettuce and spinach are usually successful.

When we broke ground two years ago, I did not anticipate the abundance of

rewards this garden would supply—the pleasure of wandering along the garden paths with a basket full of delectable homegrown produce, a replete and beautiful table to share with friends and family, the hope and optimism in the sowing of seeds. This has been a wonderful addition to our lives and to Squire House Gardens. [49](#)

*Landscape designer Martin Stern is co-owner of Squire House Gardens in Afton.*

## Building a Formal Vegetable Garden

- Remove lawn from area using a sod-kicker or gas-powered sod cutter, which are available at most equipment-rental companies.
- Level the space.
- Lay out the beds using stakes and string. If stone edging is used, the stone should be level and set in 4 inches deep and 2 inches higher than the surrounding ground.
- Once the edging is placed, dig the soil of the interior area and amend it with aged manure, compost, or rich black humus. If the existing soil is overly sandy or heavy clay, replace all or part of it with a garden mix (available at garden centers). Since there will be settling, be sure to heap the soil somewhat higher in the middle of the bed. After a few rains, rake the bed and prepare to plant.
- Excavate the soil areas occupied by paths to a minimum depth of 6 inches. Mulch can be laid, but a more permanent choice is gravel. If gravel is used, apply a 3-inch base of crushed limestone and compact it. Lay a top layer of finer gravel over the base. —M.S.