

Creating Vegetable Centerpieces

By Susan Camp

My method for arranging flowers is to stick a bunch of fresh herbs or a few hydrangea blooms in a vase or empty bottle and hope someone will admire my minimalist design technique. When Amelita Thomas, well-known in Gloucester for her unique, artistic flower arrangements, spoke at our monthly Gloucester Master Gardeners meeting last week, I thought, “Oh good, maybe I’ll learn something about creating a centerpiece that doesn’t look like it was assembled by a preschooler.”

I did learn some helpful tips about arranging, not flowers, but fresh vegetables. Amelita’s lively presentation, which included constructing several interesting, attractive centerpieces, piqued my interest in this unusual art form. She quickly assembled kale and other greens, sweet and hot peppers, radishes, squash, eggplant, broccoli, and Brussels sprouts into cleverly arranged centerpieces. My favorite was the arrangement pictured with this article: Amelita used a hollowed-out eggplant as a vase to hold huge, blue-green collard leaves and skinny, red radishes, accented by a few brick-red zinnias. Very simple, but striking.

Amelita told us that she knows the produce manager at every local grocery store on the Middle Peninsula and Peninsula, and which days of the week produce arrives at each store, as freshness is paramount. She shops at an Asian market for unusual, colorful greens and vegetables. Hispanic markets also offer varieties of chilies, cacti, and other vegetable and fruits not found in chain supermarkets.

If you Google “vegetable arrangements”, you will receive millions of hits, including numerous YouTube videos that demonstrate how to combine both common and unique varieties of vegetables and fruits into arrangements that range from cute to whimsical to downright quirky, but never formal or boring. It’s hard to take bumpy, twisty, oddly-shaped vegetables seriously.

I combined a few tips from Amelita with suggestions from several online articles about crafting fresh vegetable arrangements. Before you begin arranging, consider the occasion. Vegetable arrangements lend themselves to casual dinners, potlucks, and barbecues. Fit your arrangement to the size of the table, so it stands out, but doesn’t overwhelm or block anyone’s view. Match your vegetable selection to the season and your color scheme for the event. Include vegetables, herbs, and flowers from your own garden to add a personal touch. Use items you have around the house as containers for your arrangements. Amelita often uses cast-off kitchen or holiday containers and spray paints them in appropriate colors for her arrangements. Several online articles suggested using clear glass containers to show off the texture and bright colors of unusual vegetables.

Amelita did not recommend washing or polishing the vegetables, but one article noted that root vegetables like beets and carrots should be washed to prevent muddying the water in a clear container. Thin-skinned summer vegetables should not be placed in water.

After deciding on the proper container and color scheme, Amelita starts her arrangements with a base of green floral foam. She adds a layer of leafy greens such as kale, then begins to select the

right vegetable for the right spot. Vegetables are attached with wooden or bamboo skewers. Sturdy wooden toothpicks can be used for small vegetables.

As you assemble your arrangement, observe it frequently from all sides for balance. Combine contrasting colors to provide depth and visual interest. Use a single, large vegetable as a focal point, and fill in empty spaces with smaller vegetables and greens. A few seasonal flowers, such as zinnias or chrysanthemums in the fall make attractive accents. Fresh herbs like rosemary, basil, or oregano add fragrance to arrangements, while their various shades of green provide contrast.

According to Amelita, her vegetable arrangements will keep in the refrigerator for about a week, after which you can disassemble the centerpiece and eat your artistic endeavor for supper. Many thanks, Amelita, for some fun and clever ideas for table arrangements!

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