

Fun & Functional Gardening



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For some people gardening is a part-time hobby, for others it's a borderline obsession. Honestly, there's nothing wrong with either. Regardless of the category you fall into, there's no reason not to make your garden as fun and functional as possible. A word of warning... once you get hooked, there's no turning back!

There are literally thousands of ways to incorporate fun and functionality into a garden space. Even better, there are no "set in stone" rules and the outcome is totally up to you. This report features a wide variety of suggestions to inspire you. And, quite honestly, it's just the beginning. Let's get started.

Arbors

Believe it or not, the concept of the arbor dates back to medieval times. Early arbors were used as a means to provide a shady passageway in hot weather. While they still accomplish the task, today's arbors are also used for decorative purposes and to anchor gates, walkways and an occasional bench or two.

There are literally hundreds of types of arbors to choose from. You are free to construct your own, either from scratch or from materials in a kit. They are also available in a number of ready-made styles.

If your garden happens to be narrow, using an arbor as an entryway is ideal. It provides an element of privacy and also the extra space to grow additional flowers, depending on what the arbor is made from.

For example, using a grapevine arbor allows climbing roses to grow beautifully in every direction. In this case, if you prefer, you can easily hide the base of the arbor with small decorative shrubs or your choice of groundcover.

Some arbors are quite simple in style, while others are very ornate. Using a combination of wood and stone is a popular choice for gardeners who are interested in architecture. Using different colors and sizes of stone makes the overall design that much more interesting.

Pairing one or more arbors with a staggered trellis fence results in a classical cottage feel. Depending on the size of your garden space, you may even want to enclose the whole area. Add a matching gate (or gates) and you have your own private backyard haven to enjoy for years to come.

It's extremely important to plan out the majority of your garden before you decide on the type of arbor you want to use. If you're adding an arbor to an existing garden, you need to match it up with the plants that are already there.

If you want to incorporate hanging pots or baskets, which are typically quite heavy, you need to choose an arbor strong enough to accommodate the extra weight. On the other hand, if you'll be using the arbor to support the growth of vines, vinyl constructions should be adequate.

Many creative gardeners opt to use salvaged materials to construct unique arbors. Some of these materials include old doors and rustic wire fencing. Remember, when it comes to constructing a one-of-a-kind arbor, you're only limited by your imagination.

Bird Baths

Including at least one bird bath in your garden helps to ensure frequent visits from your feathered friends. You may even get lucky enough to see one or two species who don't have an interest in taking advantage of your bird feeders.

Incorporating more than one bird bath into your space is a great idea if you live in an area with lots of different kinds of birds. Some species aren't especially social and prefer to keep to themselves.

It goes without saying that you should choose a level spot in a safe area - especially if you're using a bird bath constructed out of lighter materials. Birds won't use a bath that they can't see. The perfect location is one that's visible to birds and to birdwatchers alike. Keep in mind, however, that if the bathing facility is totally exposed, some birds might not use it. They have a tendency to get nervous when they drink or bathe.

It's up to you whether you want to put the bird bath in the sun or in the shade. If you live in a cooler climate, you might want to place it in the sunniest spot available. This helps to keep the water warmer. On the other hand, if you live someplace hot, placing the bird bath in the shade helps to keep the water cooler and slow down the growth of bacteria.

It's not recommended that you position a bird bath under a fruit tree or any other tree that sheds blooms or nuts. In addition, it should be far enough away from bird feeders to avoid stray seeds from finding their way into the water.

While it's certainly ok to put a bird bath in the middle of a flower bed, take into consideration the delicacy of the surrounding plants before doing so. Bird feces changes the acidity level of soil. Delicate plants may not live through the change.

Change the water frequently. Birds won't play or bathe in dirty water. The closer you put your bird bath to a water source, the easier it will be to maintain, and the more the birds will appreciate your efforts.

Bird Feeders

With such a large variety of bird feeders to choose from, it's extremely easy to add whimsy to any garden and do your part in feeding birds at the same time. The more you know about bird feeder etiquette, the better the chance you'll have of enjoying the widest variety of fowl possible.

Bird watching is a very enjoyable pastime. There's nothing like observing these interesting little creatures after a hectic day. So, why not include several bird feeders in your garden space?

The absolute best place to position a bird feeder is in a spot that simulates a bird's natural feeding habitat. For example, if you're trying to attract woodpeckers, place suet feeders near tree trunks. For best results, don't place feeders in a noisy area. Birds prefer a quiet place to dine.

In regard to visibility, birds won't visit your feeder unless they can see it. Think back to the previous information about bird bath placement. The same holds true in this case. Also, if you use any type of chemicals in your garden area, it's not a place to put a feeder. Birds eat seeds that fall to the ground. You don't want to serve them contaminated feed.

Remember to strategically place your bird feeders so that filling them is easy. You certainly don't want to have to pull out a stepladder every time they need a refill. Obviously, keeping your feeders full will result in attracting more birds.

If you live in an area that frequently experiences windy or rainy weather, it's a good idea to situate your feeders in a sheltered area. This protects both the feeder itself and your feathered friends from inclement weather.

Squirrels are another issue to consider. Squirrels love to raid bird feeders. It's a fact of nature. Not only do they consume large quantities of seed and other bird-related treats, they are also known to wreak havoc on whatever vessel they are eating out of.

Many people plant colorful flowers around their bird feeders. This attracts birds to the area, as does the inclusion of bird baths and perches.

Don't forget to include two or three hummingbird feeders in your garden, if hummingbirds are native to your location. These tiny birds are so interesting to watch. Once you initially attract them to your feeders, chances are they'll keep coming back for more. Sometimes, they even bring their friends along.

Fun Flowers and Veggies

Children love to garden. Letting them get involved is fun for everybody - not to mention educational. There are many flowers and vegetables which are perfect for little gardeners. Miniature garden tools are also available, which make it easier to get things done.

Believe it or not, there are many plants that teach children about the five senses. For instance, sunflowers come in a variety of colors and sizes, and are a great way to introduce the difference between orange, yellow, red and white.

Mint and dill are both very fragrant and simple to grow. Kids will be surprised to learn that mint is available in many unique fragrances such as chocolate, pineapple and lemon. Dill smells like pickles and has feathery foliage, which is fun to touch.

What child isn't intrigued by a pumpkin? Allowing them to grow their own will make their Halloween jack-o'-lantern all the more special. Purchase seed varieties that produce white pumpkins or miniature pumpkins for a bigger surprise at harvest time. Gourds are an interesting alternative, because there are so many different shapes and sizes to choose from.

Some gardeners aren't aware that cotton can be grown successfully in many backyard gardens. In fact, the task is relatively simple. This is a great way to teach children about the history of cotton and all the different ways that it's used today.

Bunny tails is another fluffy choice that kids will find interesting. It's actually ornamental grass that produces "powder puff-like" flowers.

A money plant is another fun option for young people to experiment with in the garden. It produces sweet-smelling white or purple flowers. But, children are typically more interested in the "silver dollar" seed pods that this plant also produces.

Miscellaneous Ideas

There are many things you can do to add whimsy to your garden that don't actually fit into a category. Put a bunch of these things together, and you'll no doubt have the "whimsiest" garden in town!

Don't overlook impracticality. For instance, has it ever occurred to you to use salvaged windows in your garden? They make beautiful accent pieces. Hang them on a fence or trellis, making sure they are securely attached. You can even attach shelves to the bottom, creating a great place to display small potted plants.

If you love art as much as you love gardening, why not combine the two? Capitalize on the adage, "one man's trash is another man's treasure." Collect garden-related objects such as old, rusty brass garden nozzles and spigot handles. Arrange them into an interesting design and then attach them to a large piece of barn wood. The end result is a one-of-a-kind work of art you'll be proud of, and which your family and friends will wholeheartedly admire.

Is there a wooden fence surrounding your garden? If so, consider adding a bit of whimsy using battle-scarred gardening gloves. It really is quite adorable. Put one of these somewhat worn-out gloves on each fence post. Space out colors and patterns to make it more visually appealing. This works great because a fence naturally leads the eye in one direction.

Make a whimsical tree, using a wide variety of discarded items such as vintage garden tools, chipped porcelain pieces, flower pot sand, old wicker baskets... just to name a few. Hang or attach each one on the arms of a tall pole. You may need to make your own "arms" by welding various lengths of pipes to the pole, to create the illusion of branches. You can even top the tree with that one special item, reminiscent of the star on a holiday tree.

If you've incorporated large potted plants into your garden space, give them a fun look by replacing ordinary mulch with things like small ceramic balls, old marbles or some other colorful objects. Who needs chopped-up wood when there are so many other exciting alternatives to jazz up your plants or small trees?

Shepherd's Hooks

Shepherd's hooks are an excellent addition to any whimsical garden. They are especially useful in smaller garden areas where actual ground space is an issue. This type of hook is also suitable for jazzing up your home's curb appeal. Simply hang your desired flower basket on each hook and enjoy. You aren't locked into using just flower baskets either. You can also use the hooks to hang garden accessories and décor such as wind chimes, bird houses, holiday-related items, and lanterns or jar candles.

It's necessary to place each hook in such a way that it receives adequate sunlight for the types of flowers that will be hanging on it. When placing the stake into the ground, make sure that it's deep enough to stay straight and sturdy.

The best location for any shepherd's hook depends on how you plan to utilize it. As mentioned, flower baskets need adequate sunlight or shade. Make sure the basket is securely attached and that it's made out of a material which withstands windy weather.

If you're hanging wind chimes, it's recommended that you place the hook near a door or window so that it's easier to listen to the melody that the chimes create. The same holds true for a bird feeder. However, keep in mind if you place the hook near a fence or railing, you might have to deal with pesky squirrels who end up eating more seed than the birds. The good news is that it's almost impossible for a squirrel to climb up the pole itself.

Shepherd's hooks are typically available with one hook or two. They're usually constructed out of iron and come in several different heights. Purchase the hooks at gardening centers and stores such as Walmart and Target.

Statues

Statues (sculptures or lawn ornaments) are a cool addition to almost any garden. They come in a variety of shapes, colors and sizes. Common construction materials include:

- Concrete (used to mass produce items such as gnomes and small figurines)
- Metal (used for sculptures, long-lasting but corrodes over time)
- Plaster (used to make very inexpensive statues, generally short lifespan)
- Ceramics (used to produce ceramic pots, typically thin and prone to breakage)
- Timber (used occasionally for garden art, rots if left untreated)
- And stone (used for long-lasting sculptures, weathers well with age)

Like many other elements you choose to add to your garden, it's better to match your statue choice to its surroundings. That is to say, you probably don't want to add a Roman statue to an Asian-themed garden unless you really have your heart set on it. Many times, the right statue is all that you need to pull everything together.

Larger statues are typically used as a focal point, meant to draw attention to a specific area of the garden. It's recommended that you avoid placing one of these in the exact center of your garden space. Off-centering it a bit is considered more visually pleasing. There is an exception to this rule, however. Placing a statue in the center of a small pond is generally "doable".

Statues are appropriate to use in alcoves or at the end of a garden path. It's also common to place them on top of columns and pedestals. Formal statues obviously work better in a formal garden setting. Whimsical statues, on the other hand, are perfect for children's gardens and other informal garden themes.

Sundials

A sundial is an interesting addition to any garden. Not only does it look great, it also serves the purpose of telling time if you want to.

Here's how it works. When a sundial is meant to be accurate, it is constructed with a flat face and a pointer that sticks up from the center. This point is referred to as a gnomon.

Depending on the time of day, the sun casts a shadow on a specific area of the sundial's face. The resulting shadow, in unison with the pointer, work together to indicate the time. Think of it like looking at the hands of a clock.

Children and those who are unaware that a sundial is capable of telling time are often quite thrilled when they discover the fact. In other words, sundials are sometimes a great conversation starter.

Sundials are constructed out of several different types of material. Three of the most popular are:

- Brass sundials - These are typically quite ornate and crafted to be the focal point of the area in which they are located. Some of them require more maintenance than others. If you already have other brass elements in your garden, this is the perfect addition.
- Aluminum sundials - These are much more affordable than brass. Even better, they offer just as much of a design choice, so you have many to choose from. Aluminum also holds up well in all different types of weather.
- Stone sundials - These are ideal to use when you want to complement stone statues that majestically watch over your garden space. They blend in easily and generally require no maintenance. In fact, they look better with age.

One of the coolest things about sundials is the fact that they are all engraved with some type of design. Some of the most common designs include flowers, animals, suns, moons and other elements of nature.

In addition, some sundials are available with specific design points. For example, antique and Roman-inspired versions are popular. If your garden fits into either of these categories, these specialty sundials are worth your consideration.

Lastly, if you really love the thought of adding sundials to your garden, you can go one step further. The sundial is actually somewhat of a collector's item. That being said, it's not uncommon to find patio furniture, benches, pedestals, bird baths and more, all decorated in a sundial-inspired motif.

Up-Cycled Pots

When it comes to up-cycled pots, the possibilities are endless. Although you can utilize them anywhere in the garden, they are especially suited for container gardening purposes. If you love flea market and thrift store shopping, this type of pot is just for you.

A fun way to display a small garden of assorted succulents is to plant them in an old metal toolbox - the open kind with just a handle and no lid. If it's a bit rusty, don't worry. That actually adds to the charm. The only thing you need to do is drill several holes in the bottom before adding dirt, for drainage purposes.

If you're lucky enough to have acquired a collection of various planters that resemble people's heads (it could happen), group them together and plant things that will eventually resemble hair or fancy hats. Believe us, it will really get people talking!

Up-cycled pots are really only limited by your imagination. People have used old bathtubs, sewing machines, wheelbarrows, canoes, teacups, rusty gutters, worn-out shoes, garbage cans and hundreds of other things as makeshift planters.

Old furniture is also an excellent choice. It's simple to cut a hole in an old chair just big enough for a pot to fit into it without falling through. You can either paint or decorate the chair or leave it as is. Chairs with wicker seats are a popular option.

It's not impossible to convert a small desk or dresser into an up-cycled container. Of course, you'll need to water-proof it before doing any planting. If you're using a dresser, a neat idea is to fill each drawer with dirt. Open the top drawer about halfway. Open the next drawer a little further. If you repeat the process with each drawer, you'll end up with a staggered effect.

Old wooden crates and barrels are also good candidates for this type of planter. They look best if used in their natural state. But, if you have your heart set on painting them, it's totally up to you. Both of these are great choices for those with an antique-themed garden.

Do you want to get really crazy? Why not give new life to an old pair of blue jeans? Convert them into a hanging planter. To accomplish this, you'll need the jeans, some wire, scissors and some small plastic containers.

Complete instructions can be found simply by plugging the phrase "make a planter out of old blue jeans" into your favorite search engine. You should have several crafty options to choose from. If you prefer, you can use a pair of old overalls instead of regular blue jeans.

You may be tempted to use something like an old cast iron pot as a planter. Yes, it would probably look as great as you imagined. However, it's not recommended. This is due to the fact that cast iron rusts when it gets wet and rust is not good for any plant.

Pinterest is an excellent place to look for more ideas. It's absolutely amazing looking at some of the things that other people come up with. There are also books on container gardening that feature lots of fun ideas for creating your own upscale pots. Don't be afraid to take a look.

The most important thing to remember is that if the container you're going to be using isn't already water-proof, you'll have to do something protect it from water in some way. If you can't, it's best to move on to another vessel that's more appropriate.

If you're into recycling, using up-cycled pots is for you. Why buy something new and boring when you can use your imagination and a little bit of elbow grease and make something

extraordinarily cool and unique? If you get really good at it, you can always make the pots to sell. That way, you'll earn a bit of extra cash to buy more garden goodies.

Waterfalls

Adding an outdoor waterfall to your garden affords you with a pleasant and relaxing décor option that the whole family will enjoy. While a waterfall takes a bit of work to install depending on the layout of your property, it's a worthwhile addition that you'll appreciate for years to come.

Every waterfall is made up of two elements. The first of these elements is the pond that the water falls into. This may be a pond that is already in place on the property, or one that you've dug specifically with this project in mind. If you are digging a new pond, line the bottom of the hole with sand when you're done. This ensures that the pond will be as level as possible.

Remember to take precautions before you start installing the new pond. Call 811 before you dig to make sure there are no buried utility lines where your pond will call home. Also, contact an electrician and have them install a GFCI outlet near where the waterfall will be located, so you have a convenient place to plug in the pump.

The second element is the slope or cascading structure that the water flows down and out of. This can be built from scratch if your property is level, or onto an existing slope if one is already available.

Building this structure can be pricey, especially in the case of larger waterfalls. This is partly because big waterfalls need a liner to channel the water between the top of the waterfall and the pond at the bottom. Once this liner is installed, boulders can be placed on it to hide it and hold it down.

The pump should drain to the top of the slope so that the water cascades down. Use a plastic crate or clay pot to house the pump, then cover it with rocks to conceal it. You can also use some other sort of decoration to hide the pump, as long as it hides all of the tubing and fits in at the top of your waterfall.

Waterfalls are an excellent decoration because they look beautiful and adds sounds of nature to your outdoor haven. They may be a bit more work to install than a simple pond or fountain, but they are a wonderful focal point for your garden and well worth the extra effort.

Weathervanes

Weathervanes can be decorative, functional, or both. This extremely helpful tool has been used for centuries to help people understand weather patterns and tell them what the weather was going to be like that day.

Today, however, they are an elegant addition to your home and garden. From a rustic or antique vibe to more whimsical or colorful one, there are many types of weathervane to choose from. Many are made of copper, while others are commonly made of steel, aluminum or vinyl. They also come in a variety of different sizes, though rooftop weathervanes tend to be larger so they are easier to see from farther away.

Some also include wind cups underneath the wind direction indicator. These cups spin as the wind blows into them, which allows you to get an idea of the wind's speed as well as its direction.

If you plan for your weathervane to be purely decorative, you can place it anywhere in your garden. However, if you want it to give an accurate reading of wind direction, you'll need to be more careful about where you put it. Mount it somewhere well above the ground, ideally six or seven feet high. It should be placed in an open area, far from any tall buildings or trees that might interfere with the flow of the wind.

While many garden vanes are meant to be mounted on a pole, rooftop versions are usually mounted onto a cupola, which is a small vent structure on the roof of a house.

Changes in the wind's direction can mean changes in the weather to come, but the specifics depend on your area and the usual climate. Generally, winds from the south are warmer, while northern winds tend to be colder in nature. Sudden, extreme changes usually signal that a storm front is on its way and that it might be best for you to take cover indoors and return to your garden once the bad weather has passed.

If you have children, incorporating a weathervane into your garden is a fun way to teach them about weather. There are so many interesting things in nature; you're never too young to get started.

Groovy Gardening Tips

Even though these gardening tips technically won't make your garden more "whimsical", they'll make the task of creating and maintaining your garden space easier. We hope you'll find them useful.

- In the event that you're using large (porch-type) planters, make it easier to lug them around by replacing the rocks you normally put in the bottom with several 20-ounce water bottles. They should be empty, with the cap screwed on. The bottles allow for adequate drainage without adding extra weight.
- Do you love hanging planters? Place one or two disposable diapers, minus the plastic, in the bottom of each planter. This helps to maintain the moisture level so that you don't have to water the plants as often. Don't waste money on national-brand diapers; store-brand ones work just as well.
- Store a ball of twine in a clay pot. When you need it, simply pull the end through the drain hole and you'll never have to worry about tangles.
- Good-quality garden tools are expensive. Keep them in tip-top condition by storing them in a large pot, filled with builder's sand. The sand prevents the tools from rusting.
- If you're leaning toward starting a "low-maintenance" garden, consider going with perennial flowers. The vast majority of them look wonderful the entire season and almost take care of themselves.
- Before you start playing in the dirt, help to ensure that your fingernails stay clean by running a bar of soap on the underside of each.
- Fashion a makeshift watering can out of an empty gallon milk jug. Poke several holes in the lid and you're good to go.
- Paint the outside of your clay pots with a thin layer of varnish or latex paint. Not only does this make them longer lasting, it also holds moisture in and keeps plant roots cooler.
- Take a few minutes to mark common gardening measurements (using a permanent marker) on a frequently used garden implement like a shovel or rake. This will save you tons of time whenever you're in the mood to plant something new.
- If you find yourself dealing with pesky aphids, try blasting them with water from the nearest hose. They typically hide on the underside of leaves. If the tsunami doesn't kill them, wrap a wide piece of duct tape around your hand (sticky-side up, of course) and get rid of them that way.
- If chilly weather threatens your plants, you can protect them with empty milk jugs. Remove the cap. Cut off the bottom of each with a pair of sharp scissors. Place the rest of the jug over your plant. Push it down in the dirt to ensure that it doesn't fall over if it gets windy.

Hopefully, these tips will save you time and frustration. The more functional you can make your garden, the more enjoyable working in it will be. Chances are, your crops will be more bountiful as well.

This information hardly scratches the surface when it comes to fun and functional gardening ideas. Everyone's dream garden and creativity level is different, and that's perfectly ok. The gardens you choose depend on your geographical location and physical abilities.

Think of your garden as a work in progress. Take your time during the initial planning stages. Read books, scour the internet and visit local garden shops for ideas. Even if you take things slow, before you know it your empty space will be a fun and functional garden. It's time to put on your garden gloves and get digging!