A Brief History of the Kitchen Garden

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The kitchen garden is among the oldest intentional garden forms in the world, arising wherever people settled long enough to cook regularly and tend the same soil year after year. Long before ornament separated itself from utility, the garden existed to feed the household.

Sharon Sable's Kitchen Garden
https://www.sharonsable.com/post/19-Simple-Kitchen-Garden-Ideas-Worth-to-Check/

Antiquity. In the ancient Mediterranean world, household plots near the dwelling supplied herbs, greens, onions, legumes, figs, and olives. Roman villas often included a *hortus* just outside the kitchen door, cultivated intensively and harvested daily. Writers like Columella and Pliny the Elder assumed that a respectable household would grow at least some of its own food close at hand.

Monastic gardens (early Middle Ages). The kitchen garden came into clearer form in monasteries. Benedictine houses organized their grounds carefully, including a patch for vegetables, a medical or healing garden for herbs which also had culinary uses, and an orchard nearby.

These monastic gardens were practical, but they were also ordered, enclosed by a fence or wall, and contemplative. Paths, beds, and water sources were laid out for efficiency and care, reinforcing the idea that tending food was a daily discipline, almost a form of prayer.

The Benedictine tradition gives this daily labor a name and a blessing. *Ora et labora*—pray and work—was never meant as a lofty ideal but as a practical rhythm of life. In the monastery garden, prayer did not end when hands reached for the hoe; it continued in the steady care of soil, seed, and harvest. The kitchen garden embodied this union perfectly: work done attentively, repeatedly, and with humility became its own form of prayer, offered not in words alone but in the faithful tending of what would feed the community.

Manor houses and estates (late Middle Ages to 18th century). As estates grew larger, the kitchen garden expanded in scale but not in spirit. Walled kitchen gardens became common in

Runner Beans on their summer trellis in our kitchen garden

Europe, especially in Britain and France. High brick or stone walls stored heat, sheltered tender crops, and allowed year-round production.

Colonial and early American gardens. In colonial North America, the kitchen garden was essential rather than decorative. Settlers brought European models but adapted them to local climates and crops: corn, beans, squash, alongside Old-World herbs and greens.

19th and early 20th centuries. With urbanization and market agriculture, kitchen gardens shrank but did not disappear. They remained common on farms, at rural homes, and among working families. During times of crisis—most famously the World War "Victory Gardens"—the kitchen garden re-emerged as a patriotic and communal act.

Modern revival. Today's kitchen garden is a conscious return to older wisdom. It reflects our contemporary interest in fresh, seasonal food, our rising ecological awareness, and a desire for connection between land and table.

While no longer strictly necessary for survival, it remains necessary for *meaning*. The modern kitchen garden recovers the ancient truth that food tastes different when one knows where it grew and who tended it.

In our patch. The kitchen garden we tend does not stand apart from this history; it grows directly out of it. What once fed monasteries, manor houses, and homesteads, now unfolds in our own hands, shaped by the same hopes and the same limits. We plan carefully, measure beds, choose seeds with intention, and turn the soil with trust born of experience. And still, the garden resists complete control. Weeds gather where we thought we'd pulled them, sunflowers cast more shade than expected, putting down compost is never quite finished, and some corners remain rough, unfinished, and full of surprises.

This is not failure but fidelity to the form itself. A kitchen garden has always lived between design and surrender, between work well done and work still waiting. It asks us to participate fully without pretending mastery, to tend what we can and to accept what we cannot. In this way, the ancient garden becomes entirely present: not a relic of the past, but a living place where history continues—row by row, meal by meal—into the life we are now living.