Turf wars

Campaigners and theorists are challenging the American obsession with garden lawns. By Simon Busch

Say, your yard's looking mighty fine lately, Jim," Stan Cox imagines commenting to a neighbour. "Everything OK with your wife?" The amount of energy devoted to lawn care in the US, he believes, is frequently in inverse proportion to the amount devoted to the bedroom.

Cox is participating in an all-out assault on American turf called Edible Estates, Fritz Haeg's project to excavate lawns across the country and to plant fruit and vegetables in their place. In a book accompanying the project, marital distraction is only one of many sins ascribed to the lawn. Haeg and his co-writers describe the average suburban sward as a kind of vegetative perversion, force-fed on fertilisers, showered with pesticides and precious water and trimmed by a CO_2-belching machine to maintain its monochromatic sheen.

The book, by Michael Pollan, *In Defence of Food*, urges us to eat only what our grandmothers would have eaten. He writes that lawns have "as much to do with gardening as floor waxing or road-paving. Gardening [is] a subtle process of give and take with the landscape". Lawns, he says, are "nature under culture's boot". When Pollan mowed his own he "ruled a totalitarian landscape". "Lawns," he concludes, "are a form of television."

Michael Foli, who, like Stan Cox, volunteered his lawn for Haeg's experiment, is anti-lawn for a different reason. Under the sway of the homeowner associations that are prominent in US suburbia, lawns are regulated to the millimetre. "Ultimately," Foli says, "the upkeep of a lawn becomes nothing more than a kind of tax on the homeowner, which he only pays out of some sense of obligation or self-interest in neighbourhood property values."

Such condemnation would be less significant had not a recent Nasa-funded study, observing all these green specks from space, startlingly concluded that turf beat even corn as the most prevalent irrigated crop in the US. It would be easy to suspect Haeg's response to such excess, substituting edible yards for mowable ones, as being mere camouflage for a deeper hatred of the suburbs and all they represent – such pseudo-concern undoubtedly characterises much environmentalism – were not his collaborators almost as conventional as the locations he was attacking.

He sought a broad mix of volunteers for his experiment. "I had sometimes 30 people in my front yard digging," says Clarence Ridgely, a plastics factory supervisor living in Baltimore. Ridgely's lawn was transformed into an orchard of fig, plum and cherry trees on one side and a herb and vegetable garden on the other.

"They did it in a decorative pattern so it doesn't just look like a row of vegetables," Ridgely says. "I just wanted to grow something edible in the front yard; I hadn't thought as far as the environmental aspects. In the summertime gardening is my hobby. I don't go bowling; I like to mess around in the yard. And, given how highly priced everything is just now, from a food prices point of view I definitely see its advantages."

Fertile Volunteers work on lawns for Fritz Haeg's project to turn people's lawns into vegetable patches

Curtis Hamilton for the Canary Project

In Austin, Texas, Alicia Wong, along with fellow tenants, took a shovel to her apartment complex lawn to teach her eight-year-old daughter that "vegetables come from somewhere other than the grocery store", as well as "to meet neighbours somewhere other than at the laundromat". Like other Edible Estate participants, she finds a vegetable patch is far more neighbourly than a lawn. Even the adolescent boys, who "we thought would object to losing a bit of football field" and, she suspects, "think gardens are women's work", pitched in, helping to move heavy stones and wheelbarrows full of dirt.

You could mount a democratic defence of the lawn as the result of something formerly so labour-intensive that it was affordable only for the wealthy – until the 19th-century invention of chemical fertiliser and Edwin Bunning's "machine for mowing lawns". Scotts' Miracle-Gro, among the world's biggest lawn-product vendors, poetically calls the lawn "a soft landing for kids at play, a blanket for families to picnic and a cushion for bare feet to roam", and "the foundation of the neighbourhood's ecosystem". Lawns reduce run-off, cool the environment, pump out oxygen and even dampen noise, the industry argues.

You could be forgiven for thinking the that this industry, guardian of an $8bn global market, and Fritz Haeg, nurturing his curious hybrid of horticulture, agitprop and art installation, were talking about entirely different things.

HOUSE & HOME

Property | Architecture | Design | Gardens

Work to live

Compact and stylish furniture for the home office Page 11

Simple life

Singer Jim Kerr on why he loves Sicily Page 3

Danish delight

Why Copenhag probably the b in the world Pag