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Greener substitute to lawns takes root

Budding movement aims to replace acres of grass with heartier vegetation.

By PAUL WENSKE
The Kansas City Star

One of the first things you note about Jim Crist's front lawn is that, well, he doesn't have one.

Instead, his south Johnson County front yard is a thicket of flowers, ornamental trees, leafy bushes, native grasses and a bramble of green tendrils rising up in suburban anarchy to the orderly lawns around it.

"I don't like mowing, and I don't like spreading and spraying weed killer and grub control, so I turned my front yard into a garden, something I like to do," said Crist, a horticulturist and master gardener.

Americans have long treasured a well-tended lawn. But a small, if



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Of the 14,520 square feet on the lot of Jim Crist's home in south Johnson County, only 900 square feet is grass.

determined, movement would replace vistas of unrelentingly green front lawns with at least pockets of exotic flower and vegetable gardens that not only are

feasts for the eyes but sources of cheap veggies, too.

No statistics exist, mainly be-

LAWNS: Edible Estate germinated in KC

FROM A1

LAWN AND GARDEN TIPS

■ **Mulch:** Cuts down on weeding, keeps roots cooler and retains moisture in the soil.

■ **If you have to water, do it in the morning.** That reduces evaporation while still allowing leaves to dry before the sun gets hot.

■ **To avoid having to water so often, water deep and long to aid root growth and increase a plant's drought tolerance.**

■ **Don't forget the trees:** Trees and shrubs also suffer in hot weather. The tree canopy shows where the roots are underground.

■ **Use fertilizers and herbicides sparingly:** Too much can make lawns even more thirsty.

■ **Water moderately:** Lawns can get by with rain or watering every two weeks. They may become dormant but won't die.

TURN LAWN SPACE INTO A GARDEN

■ **Drive around the neighborhood to see how much lawn your neighbors devote to plants.**

■ **Observe plant combinations and styles you like.**

■ **Take into account how much sun and shade you have to determine what plants will thrive.**

■ **Use ornamental trees and shrubs for accents.**

■ **Use fewer varieties of plants but larger quantities, to imitate nature.**

■ **Plan for the seasons to provide winter evergreens, spring bulbs, summer abundance and fall colors.**

■ **Be realistic about how much time you can spend on gardening a week and plan accordingly.**

■ **When in doubt, ask a professional.** Many landscapers charge a minimal consultation fee.

Sources: Vivian Pine of Floraculture, (913) 469-1887; Johnson County-Kansas State University Research & Extension Office, (913) 715-7000 or www.oznet.ksu.edu/johnson.

symbolic reasons because it is smack in the geographic center of the United States.

Stan and Priti Cox of Salina allowed their front yard to be used. It was transformed with dwarf peach, plum and apple trees, a grape arbor, blackberry bushes, herbs, sweet potatoes, strawberries and rhubarb, sunflowers, wheat grass, flax and other food plants.

Stan Cox said that at first, his neighbors wondered what the heck was going on, "but when things started growing, they got real interested." No one complained, he said. Cox kept the garden, which now nearly obscures his house.

Cox was kind of a natural for the project. He is a plant breed-

ing expert at the Land Institute, which has its headquarters in Salina. Cox became so sold on the idea he began writing about his front-yard garden for the Land Institute and for alternative Internet publications, including AlterNet.org.

"I'm not anti-grass," Cox said. "My target was mainly what I call the industrial lawn, where it becomes a vicious cycle. You pour on more water and herbicides to make it grow, so then you have to cut it again. It means more gas, water, chemicals and more runoff."

His writings struck a nerve and were picked up by other Web sites and blogs. Cox and Haeg received e-mail from people nationwide who

wanted to grow front-yard gardens. In July, Cox, Haeg and the Edible Estates concept were profiled in *The New York Times*. Haeg expanded his Web site, www.fritzhaeg.com, to devote space to Edible Estates. And he has completed two new projects and plans another soon in Minneapolis.

Dennis Patton, horticulture agent with the Johnson County-Kansas State University extension office, said he does not think Kansas City area homes associations have much to worry about.

"The lawn is certainly a part of what makes a home setting," Patton said. "And there are environmentally friendly ways to do it."

Still, he added, there is a lesson: Many Americans are overzealous in caring for lawns.

"Everyone should be aware that anything that goes on their lawn adds to what goes on downstream. What people do on their postage stamp lawn is part of a bigger picture."

Vivian Pine, owner of Floraculture, a local landscaping firm, thinks there is a middle ground. She embraces the idea of front-lawn gardens because it promotes soil-friendly uses and conservation. Pine said plants with long roots hold water better than the short roots of most grasses.

Pine said that a front lawn that includes indigenous plants can be fairly low maintenance.

"You might convert a third of your yard," she said. "That is manageable, and it won't make you stand out in the neighborhood."

Still, Pine does not expect many homeowners to tear out all their turf: "We love our lawns," she said.

Crist expects to find out soon how much people love lawns. He and his wife are moving, and their home in the Stanley area of Overland Park is up for sale.

But it's hard to tell: The "for sale" sign is nearly obscured by vegetation.

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cause the movement so far amounts to little more than a persistent dandelion. But largely because of an art project to turn a front lawn in Salina, Kan., into a so-called Edible Estate, it is gaining widespread publicity through the Internet.

Consumers spend more than \$11 billion a year on water, pesticides, fertilizers and gas to keep 30 million acres of lawn green and tidy, making grass America's largest irrigated crop. Yet, critics say, consumers get little practical value from this endless regimen.

"Now it is time to question how much lawn we need and what is sustainable," said Diana Balmori, a New York landscape and urban design expert and co-author of the book *Redesigning the American Lawn: A Search for Environmental Harmony*.

Balmori said that lawns are not natural to America. The concept was imported from England, where lawns thrive in near-constant drizzle. In America, she said, an obsession with grass lawns has produced "an impoverished landscape. ... It's a loss of biodiversity that starts with our front lawn."

And while homeowners battle the heat to keep their lawns green, critics raise environmental worries about water and energy consumption, chemically tainted streams, and air pollution from mowers and leaf blowers.

"The perfect lawn is an ecological boondoggle," said Ted Steinberg, an environmental historian at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland and author of the book *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn*.

Steinberg says that consumers are brainwashed to believe they have to flood their lawns with water, fertilizer and weed killer.

"Will it be the end of the world if you get a little clover?" he asked. Steinberg views the lawn revolt as a throwback to a pre-World War II period when people grew vegetables and raised chickens in their front yards.

The \$35 billion lawn-care industry isn't worried yet.

"Consumers get a lot of utility out of their lawns," said Tom Delaney, director of government affairs for the Professional Land Care Network, an industry trade group.

Delaney said that lawns have many benefits. An average lawn generates enough oxygen for a family of four, and the cooling effect of eight front lawns can equal 70 tons of air conditioning — enough for 16 average homes. Turf traps dust, filters contaminants and reduces runoff.

"A healthy lawn certainly produces curb appeal," Delaney said. He said a nice lawn adds 20 percent to the price of a home. "And try playing ball over a garden or ground cover."

Even so, you still can't eat your front lawn, say advocates of a new experimental lawn alternative called Edible Estates. This latest attempt to bag traditional lawn care did not begin with environmentalists, though. It began with an artistic idea that was planted in Kansas City.

Stacy Switzer, artistic director of Grand Art, a nonprofit downtown art group, was asked by the Salina Art Center to develop ideas for a project titled "Eating: A Community Project Exploring What, How and Why We Eat."

The challenge "was to look at the need for all of us to examine how deeply we participate in the ecology of where our food comes from," Switzer said. Out of that search came the proposal by California artist Fritz Haeg to replace a resident's front lawn with a garden. And that was what he did in July 2005.

Haeg said he chose Salina for