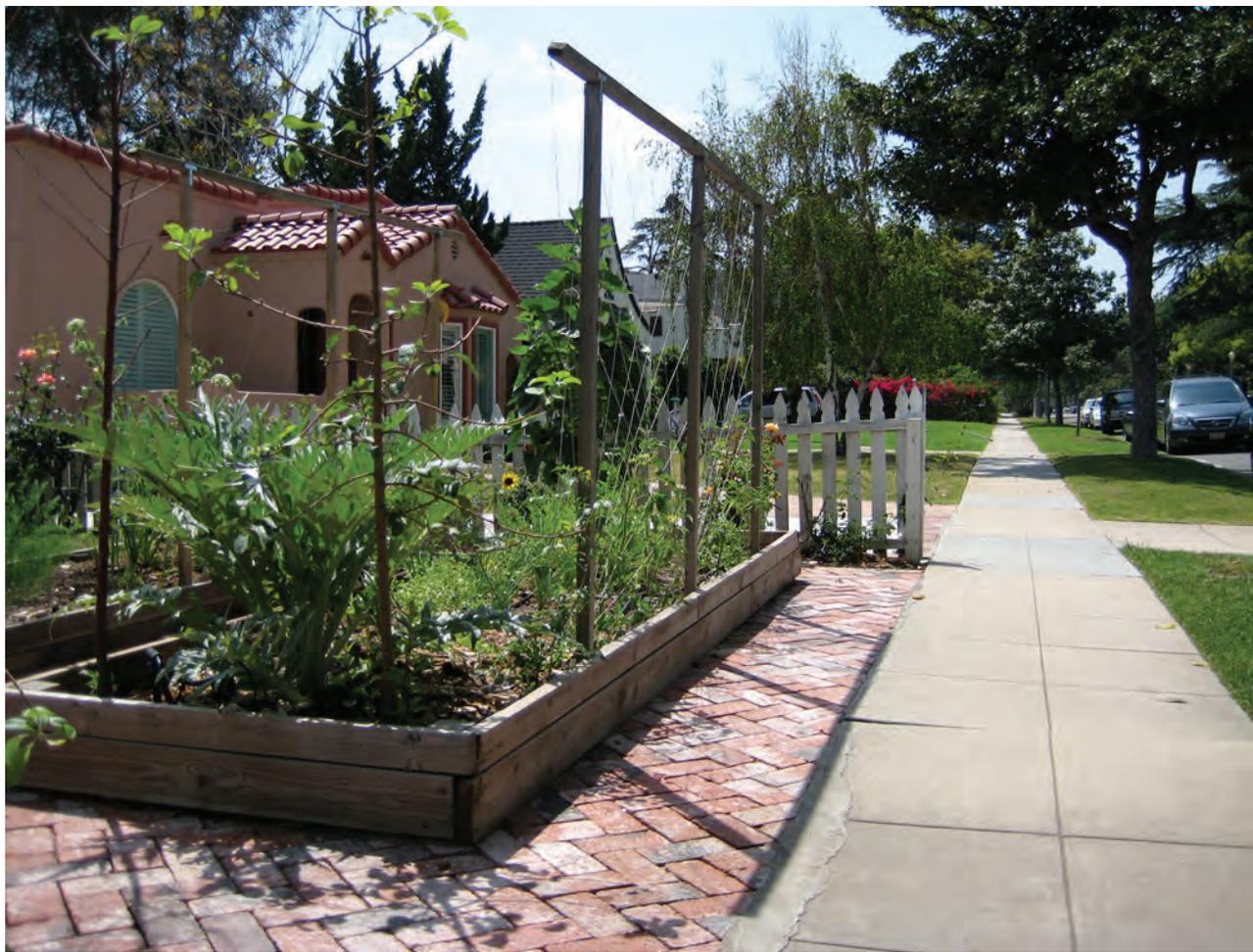


Lawn Be

The time has come for **edible** front yards.



Christopher Brandow has replaced most of his lawn in Pasadena, California, with raised beds of vegetables, fruits, and herbs. A bright green artichoke flourishes in Brandow's edible front yard.

Gone

It's a perfect spring day in Pasadena, California, and Christopher Brandow is bending over an artichoke planted in his front yard. A man drives by in his car and yells out the window, "Better mow that lawn, Chris!" Brandow chuckles and waves.

In this neighborhood, most of the single-story houses—traditional California bungalows—have beautiful, bright-green



All photos this story by Gabriela Worrel

By Gabriela Worrel

front lawns. Brandow has something different to brag about. Three years ago, shortly after moving into the neighborhood, he decided to plant a vegetable garden in his front yard. That was the practical choice, he says.

“It made the most sense to put [the garden] in the front yard, in terms of the space and sunlight available to us,” says Brandow. At first, the garden held only two raised boxes, but a year ago he tore up most of the existing lawn, added two more raised beds, and lined the space between the beds with red bricks. Nothing remains of the lawn except a small strip of grass next to the front porch.

Brandow and many others are rethinking our landscaping choices. Lawns, of course, have been America’s de facto landscape choice for homes, parks, and sports fields. We like lawns so much that they have become the number one irrigated crop in the U.S., according to a NASA-sponsored study published in 2005. It’s estimated that there are 49,000 square miles of lawns in the country, an area nearly the size of Greece. In all, the U.S. has three times as many acres of irrigated lawn as irrigated corn.

The same study estimates that watering all the lawns in the lower 48 states requires 200 gallons of water per person per day. All that grass also requires mowing, which is no small thing. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, a traditional gas-powered lawnmower emits carbon monoxide (a poisonous gas), as well as hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides, which react in the atmosphere to create ground-level ozone, leading to smog and harming human and plant health. This is why, in 2008, the EPA and the California Air Resources Board tightened the emissions standards of lawnmowers and other small off-road, engine-driven vehicles, requiring manufacturers to produce more efficient machines in hopes of reducing by 35 percent the hydrocarbon and nitrous oxide spewing from these machines.

Lawns are often treated with chemicals that ultimately pollute waterways. On the other hand, the NASA study also found that U.S. lawns, if appropriately maintained, are a collective carbon sink, sequestering up to 37 billion pounds of carbon each year—and keeping it out of the atmosphere. In light of these facts, we might ask what purpose lawns really serve.

Fritz Haeg, a landscape architect based in Los Angeles, proposes in his book, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, that the resource-hungry and visually insipid domestic lawn should be replaced with productive—and attractive—edible gardens. “The lawn is something that symbolizes the larger issue of our quality of life,” says Haeg, adding that edible front yard gardens help people lead healthier and more environmentally responsible lifestyles and let them display their unique preferences. Haeg has worked with several home owners across the country to install a variety of prototype gardens, each one appropriate to its climate and region.

No more yard envy?

Americans love their lawns, but this attitude may be changing as more and more home owners redefine their relationship with their yards and become mindful of issues related to food: security, safety, and quality. Cities like Vancouver, British Columbia, and Portland, Oregon, are focusing on urban agriculture research and policies that support small-scale urban farming. The *Journal of the American Planning Association* reports that both cities have identified urban lands where food could be grown.

Steve Cohen, a planner in Portland’s Department of Food Policy and Programs, notes that his agency has offered more than 700 courses, including training in food production skills. The city’s Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, an entity created from the merger of the Bureau of Planning and the Office of Sustainable Development, oversees the resident education program. Cohen says that the program has been “phenomenally successful.”

Current courses include organic gardening, container gardening, beekeeping, intensive farming, canning and preserving, and cheese making. Many of these courses can serve residents who are in the process of converting their lawns to edible landscaping. Vancouver has taken a different approach by issuing design guidelines for urban agriculture, including edible yards. (See “Vancouver’s Green Thumb” elsewhere in this issue.)

Vancouver and Portland may be in the vanguard of yard-to-food-garden conversions, but many other cities, including Los Angeles, also let their residents garden this way. The LA zoning code allows conver-

sions of traditionally landscaped yards into edible gardens, says Sheila Gershon, a project manager with Fisher Associates Inc., consultants based in Yorba Linda. She notes that the few restrictions include a maximum height of three and a half feet for vegetation (except shade trees), the prohibition of greenhouses in the front setback, and a prohibition on using the garden as a commercial enterprise.

Fritz Haeg has been doing something less official and on a smaller scale. Last year, with Haeg’s help, Clarence Ridgely installed an edible garden in the front yard of his Baltimore home—a logical step beyond the two raised boxes of edibles he had grown before. Like Christopher Brandow, Ridgely has nothing but good things to say about his garden.

“It has been a great experience so far,” Ridgely says, partly because his neighbors now stop to chat. He also reports that the food is wonderful, the neighborhood kids like to eat the berries, and the learning process is ongoing.

Further, Ridgely says that neither the local home owners association nor the city has raised objections to his new front yard. He reports that the association is fairly relaxed about landscaping rules, and its members are open to gardens. In fact, Ridgely says, he has noticed many more gardens popping up around the community.

Home owners associations

Ridgely’s home owners association may be an exception. Although policies vary from community to community, home owners who buy a property in a community regulated by an HOA must agree to the conditions—including restrictions—contained in a document called the “Community Covenants and Restrictions,” or CC & Rs.

Haeg discusses the role of HOAs in his book, noting that covenants in HOA zones often have specific rules about what should be grown in the front yard and how it should be maintained. Some covenants go so far as to dictate the exact color and height of the lawn. When asked if he’s had any trouble with HOAs or neighbors in general on his projects, he says, “No, but I’d like to do a project where it causes ripples.”

One region where it might do so is Orange County, California, known for its many master planned communities. Jim Shubsda, president of Common In-



For Brandow, fresh food and front yards go together like peas and carrots—and lettuce, and tomatoes, and apples.

terests, a company that manages several HOAs in the southern part of the county, points out that most of those communities prohibit unconventional landscaping, including edible gardens, out of concern for aesthetics and property values. “Some of the very upscale communities may approve a very well-designed front garden,” he notes, adding that it would be rare for an HOA board to approve anything that strays beyond the traditional lawn, shrubs, and trees.

Then again, some HOAs in Orange County may be more open to unconventional ideas. Jack Williams, who manages several single- and multifamily communities in Irvine, seems to embrace the notion of a vegetable garden, even in community areas. “Most [HOAs] don’t promote gardens because they can be unsightly and people are concerned with aesthetics, but if someone were to step forward and submit a good plan for how to design and maintain the garden, I don’t imagine anyone would object,” Williams says.

Community matters

If edible front yards can promote a better community life, why not encourage them? That is the stance of Food Not Lawns, a community organization based in Eugene, Oregon, that claims the local organic garden is the basic unit of food production, but also basic to a united, healthy, and sustainable community.

Heather Flores, founder of Food Not Lawns, says in her book of the same name that one’s yard can be a vehicle for personal growth and transformation—as well as the transformation of the surrounding community, the local ecology, and ultimately, the planet.

Time and money are the biggest obstacles to edible front yards, Flores says, adding that other barriers include people’s fear of homegrown food, zoning codes, and restrictive covenants. Her solution to potential neighborhood conflicts over landscaping is to reach out to others and to share gardens.

Apparently her friendship-based approach has been working, because a new chapter of Food Not Lawns is opening up every few weeks in locations all over the country. The chapters are especially popular on the West Coast.

Food Not Lawns is growing because “its strength is in connectivity,” says James Dockstader, the president of the organization’s Orange County chapter. He also notes that www.freedomgardens.org, a website that connects gardeners across the county, now has 4,000 members. The movement toward edible landscaping is so strong there, he says, that even local plant nurseries are noticing. “If you talk to anyone who owns a nursery in the area, they’ll tell you they’re having a hard time keeping [seeds and other products] on the shelves.”

If you are wondering who else might be converting a lawn, look to the Obamas. Within weeks of moving into the White House, Michelle Obama planted a vegetable garden on the south lawn, as Eleanor Roosevelt did during World War II. The White House says the garden will make a statement about the need for a healthful diet in a country where obesity and diabetes are rampant.

Now if we could just figure out how many carbon emissions are prevented by converting all those lawns to gardens.

■ Gabriela Worrel is the executive director of Cultivating Sustainable Communities in Los Angeles.

RESOURCES

FROM APA

Wendy Mendes, et al: “Using Land Inventories to Plan for Urban Agriculture,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Autumn 2008.

LAWNS AND MORE

“Your Yard and Clean Air” (May 1996) is at www.epa.gov/otaq/equip-ld.htm#consumer. “Looking for Lawns,” by Rebecca Lindsey, in *Earth Observatory*: <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/Lawn/lawn.php>.

The website UrbanChickens.org is compiling a state-by-state list of ordinances. *Backyard Poultry* magazine: www.backyardpoultrymag.com.

For more on the edible schoolyard: www.edibleschoolyard.org. Berkeley’s Malcolm X School Garden: <http://malcolmx.berkeleypta.org/mxgarden/index.htm>.

IN PRINT

Heather Flores: *Food Not Lawns*. Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2006. More at www.foodnotlawns.net. Fritz Haeg: *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*. Metropolis Books, 2008.