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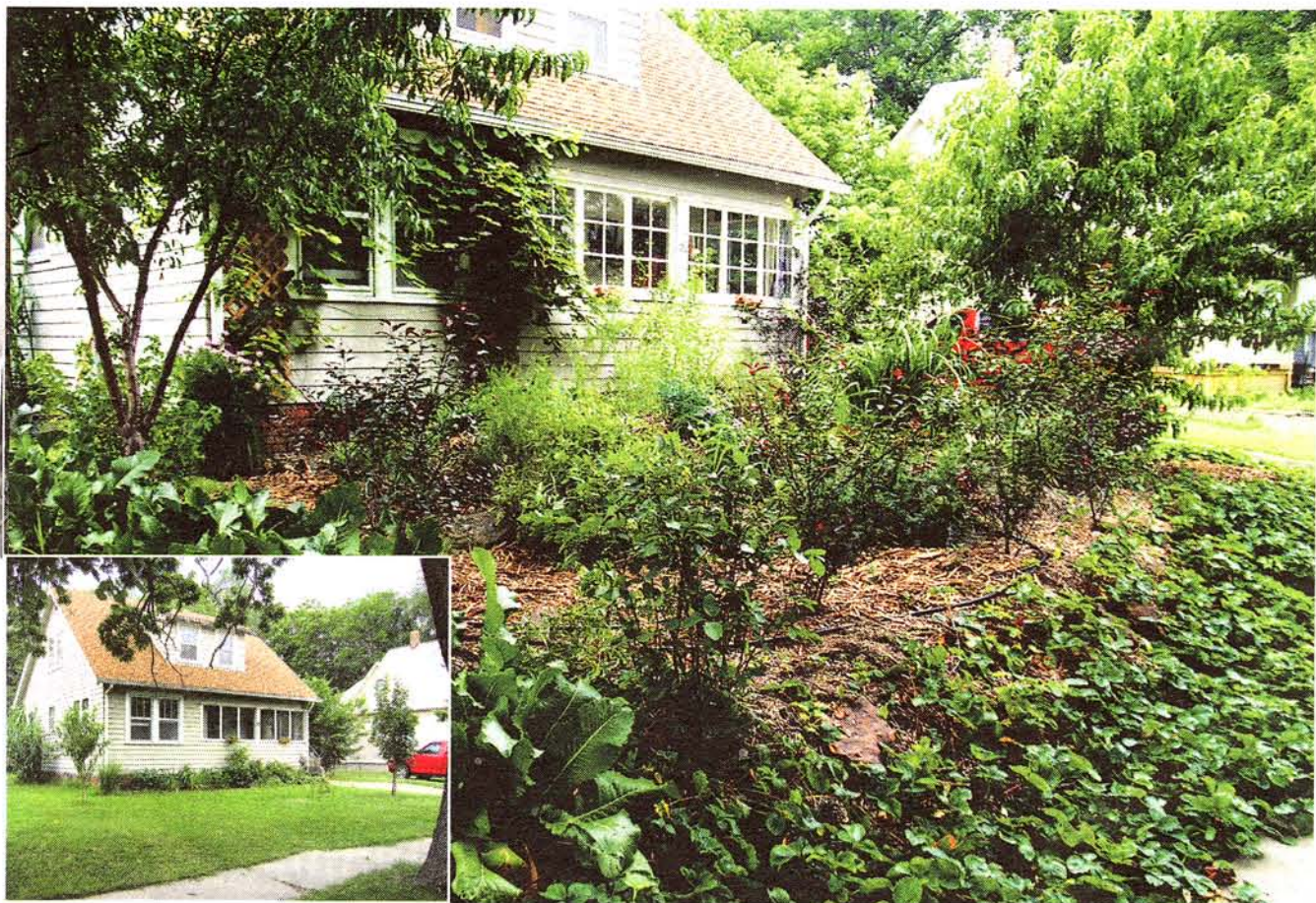
The Sydney

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# Frontline action

A campaign to turn lawns into food is gathering speed.

Words **Nick Galvin**

THERE are 12 million hectares of lawn in the US. That's 12 million hectares of carefully tended, mown, watered – and largely useless – space.

And of that massive swathe of unused greenery, the worst offender, says Fritz Haeg, is the front lawn.

"The front lawn is so deeply embedded in our national psyche that we don't really see it any more, at least for what it actually is," he says. "What is that chasm between house and street? Why is it there? Or rather, why is nothing there?"

Intrigued by this question, Haeg – an architect, artist and designer – decided to challenge the grassy status quo with a project he has called Edible Estates.

The idea is as simple as it is radical – rip up the lawn in front of a single house in a suburban street and replace it with a vegetable garden. But the brilliance of Haeg's concept comes from the careful selection of site – each is chosen to have maximum impact on the area. The more regular and uniform the front lawns in a street, the greater will be the shock when one is suddenly replaced with a veggie patch, which is precisely the effect Haeg seeks from these acts of "benevolent provocation".

It's not so easy to explain why it should be so shocking to see zucchini, carrots and beans in place of a manicured sward – but at least some of the answer lies in the lawn's English roots.

"The front lawn was born of vanity and decadence under the assumption that fertile land was infinite," Haeg says. "The English estate owner in Tudor times would demonstrate his vast wealth by *not* growing food on the highly visible fecund property in front of his residence. Instead this vast swathe of land would become a stage of ornamental green upon which he could present his immense pile of a house."

Interestingly, at times of national emergency, however, the front lawn has

been pressed into use. This was particularly so during wartime when the governments in the US and Britain exhorted their citizens to "dig for victory".

"By the end of World War II, over 80 per cent of American households were growing some of their own food," Haeg says. The movement petered out within months of Victory Day.

Haeg's interest in the front lawn and vegetable gardening arose after he moved to Los Angeles and began looking for a new art project.

"I wanted to do a project for the entire country about how we are all living today," he says. "The project started with that impulse and the thought that the front lawn in America seemed like a place ready for some reconsideration."

The first Edible Estate (documented in Haeg's book *Edible Estates: Attack On The Front Lawn*) was planted at the home of Stan Cox in Salina, Kansas. This location was symbolic as the near geographic centre of the US. The garden has been flourishing now for nearly three years and Cox says it has brought almost universal approval from his neighbours, once they got over the initial shock.

However, Edible Estate No. 3, built in Maplewood, New Jersey, provoked two radically different responses as soon as the volunteers began removing the lawn.

"One neighbour a few doors down came by and asked a lot of questions about what we were doing and why and, literally hours later, they were tearing up their own front lawn," Haeg says. "But the neighbour on the other side was really, really upset and continued to be upset all the way through, even when the garden established itself. She saw it as a real threat – like anarchy had come to her neighbourhood."

Often the instinctive reaction from neighbours when they see a lawn disappear to be replaced by a food garden is that their property prices will go into freefall. The next common response is to point out that passers-by will "steal" the



**Before and after ... (top) the Salina garden in Kansas; (above) designer and author Fritz Haeg.**

Photos: Fritz Haeg, Christopher Kreiling

produce. However, Edible Estate owners usually give away excess produce, which in itself is a mildly subversive act.

"People typically have baskets in the front of whatever is ripe and they can't use, and neighbours are welcome to take it," Haeg says. "What's the alternative – making fortresses?"

Haeg is under no illusion that the battle to find a sustainable way of living will be won solely on the front lawn but he believes simple first steps such as growing food can become very powerful – especially as the Edible Estate idea appears to be spreading courtesy of the internet.

"We as a society are now realising the way we are living and the whole way we are occupying space is flawed," he says. "It's not going to be a big turnaround that will fix it, it's going to be a lot of small ideas. I'm interested in the power of art and design to be revolutionary and also to be provocative."

"But I also think we are tired of being provoked in conventional ways using sex or violence – the things that are going to turn people off."

*Edible Estates: Attack On The Front Lawn* by Fritz Haeg is published by Metropolis Books (Thames and Hudson), \$45; [www.fritzhaeg.com/edible-estates-book.html](http://www.fritzhaeg.com/edible-estates-book.html).