

## CUTTINGS; Redefining American Beauty, by the Yard

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Published: July 13, 2006

LAKEWOOD, Calif. - WHEN Cecilia Foti, a seventh grader at the Bancroft Middle School here, was asked to write a "persuasive" essay for her English class in the spring semester, she did not choose a topic deeply in tune with her peers -- the pros and cons of school uniforms, say, or the district's retro policy on chewing gum and cellphones.

Instead, she addressed the neighborhood's latest controversy: her family's front yard. "The American lawn needs to be eradicated from our society and fast!" she wrote, explaining that her family had replaced its own with a fruit and vegetable garden. She argued for the importance of water conservation, the dangers of pesticides and the dietary benefits and visual appeal of an edible yard. "Was the Garden of Eden grass?" she reasoned. "No."

In this quintessential 1950's tract community about 25 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles, the transformation of the Foti family's front yard from one of grass to one dense with pattypan squash plants, cornstalks, millionaire eggplants, crimson sweet watermelons, dwarf curry trees and about 195 other edible varieties has been startling.

"The empty front lawn requiring mowing, watering and weeding previously on this location has been removed," reads a placard set amid veggies in oval planting beds fronting the street.

The sign is a not-so-subtle bit of propaganda proclaiming the second and most recent installment of Edible Estates, an experimental project by Fritz Haeg, a 37-year-old Los Angeles architect and ersatz Frederick Law Olmsted. The project, which he inaugurated on the Fourth of July weekend in 2005 in a front yard in Salina, Kan., is part of a nascent "delawning" movement concerned with replacing lawns around the country with native plants, from prairie grasses in suburban Chicago to cactus gardens in Tucson.

It is a kind of high-minded version of "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition." As Mr. Haeg put it, "It's about shifting ideas of what's beautiful."

"It's about what happens on that square of land between the public street and the private house. It's about social engagement. I wanted to get away from the idea of home as an obsessive isolating cocoon."

The Fotis volunteered for the project after reading about it in early 2006 at treehugger.com, an environmental Web site. Cecilia's father, Michael Foti, a 36-year-old computer programmer and avid gardener who raises chickens in the backyard, was eager to put his environmental politics into practice.

"I am looking to think differently about this space," Mr. Foti said of the family's once-placid front yard. "I want to look outward rather than inward."

The delawning was accomplished over Memorial Day weekend by a SWAT team of some 15 recruits who read about the project on Mr. Haeg's Web site. Mr. Haeg arrived armed with three rented sod cutters, a roto-tiller and a dozen rakes and shovels, and within three days the yard was transformed.

The new garden has caused much rumbling in the neighborhood, a pin-neat community originally built after World War II for returning G.I.'s where colorful windsocks and plastic yard butterflies prevail. Some neighbors fret about a potential decline in property values, while others worry that all those succulent fruits and vegetables will attract drive-by thieves -- as well as opossums and other vermin -- in pursuit of Maui onions and Brandywine tomatoes.

But the biggest concern seems to be the breaching of an unspoken perimeter. "What happens in the backyard is their business," said a 40-year-old high-voltage lineman who lives down the street and would give only his initials, Z.V. "But this doesn't seem to me to be a front yard kind of a deal."

In spite of its contemporary media-savvy title, Edible Estates is a throwback to the early 20th century, when yards were widely regarded as utilitarian spaces, particularly in working-class neighborhoods. As recently as the 1920's and 1930's, decorative lawns -- which in this country date back at least to George Washington's Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello -- were still largely the province of the elite, according to Ted Steinberg, a historian at Case Western Reserve and the author of the new book "American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn" (W. W. Norton). The yard was for putting food on the table, Dr. Steinberg said, in the form of vegetables, goats, rabbits and small livestock.

It was not until the postwar period that the notion of the lawn as the "national landscape" developed as a vehicle for upward mobility, with zoning setbacks designed to encourage clover- and dandelion-free perfection -- "the living version of broadloom carpeting," Dr. Steinberg said.

While backyards remained private, the front yard evolved into "a ceremonial space that appears effortlessly and without labor," said Margaret Crawford, a professor of urban design and planning theory at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. "In middle-class neighborhoods," she said, "the idea of actually using the front yard is extremely unusual."

Mr. Haeg, who was raised in suburban Minneapolis, now lives in a geodesic dome in East Los Angeles with a subterranean sprayed-concrete cave worthy of Dr. No. Covered in mouse-brown asphalt shingles, it dates to 1984; he found it on the Internet in 2000. Soon after he moved in, he began cultivating edible plants like kale and pineapple guava in his terraced garden, and he surrounded the dome with trellises for grapevines.

Mr. Haeg is perhaps best known in Los Angeles for his Sundown Salons, which transform his three-level, shag-carpeted home into an alternative cultural space that attracts artists, other architects, recent M.F.A. graduates and assorted gadflies. The theme and tenor of the once-a-month gatherings, which began shortly after he moved in, have varied; they've included traditional literary gatherings as well as gay and lesbian performance art and all-night knitting and "make your own pasta animal" sessions.

Mr. Haeg has taught at several colleges, including the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., where he oversaw his students' design and construction of Gardenlab, a campus community garden, beginning in 2001. He is now designing a house for a film executive in the Silver Lake section of Los Angeles and a rooftop garden for an apartment complex in downtown Los Angeles.

Mr. Haeg selected Salina as his first Edible Estates site for its heartland symbolism -- it is close to the geographic center of the country -- and found his first subjects, Stan and Priti Cox, through the Land Institute, a Salina-based organization dedicated to ecologically sustainable agriculture, where Mr. Cox worked as a plant geneticist.

"I didn't feel any emotion," Ms. Cox, 38, said of her defunct sod expanse. "It was monotonous. Now my senses are stimulated."

Mr. Haeg is planning seven more Edible Estates sites. (Coming soon: Baltimore and Minneapolis.) Though he lacks training in landscape architecture or horticulture, he has been shrewd in his recruitment of plant-literate people with sunny, treeless front yards.

So far each "estate" has been planted to reflect its region: the Cox garden in Kansas is heavy with okra and corn, with a smattering of bitter melon, pimento and curry trees in deference to Ms. Cox's Indian roots. The Fotis' yard in California is resplendent with pomelos, oranges, mandarins and other citrus fruit.

Mr. Haeg regards the Edible Estates project as something of a manifesto. He fantasizes about setting off a "chain reaction" among gardeners that would challenge Americans to rethink their lawns -- which he insists on calling "pre-edible" landscapes -- though he knows the chances are slim. Still, he wants to make a point.

"Diversity is healthy," he said. "The pioneers were ecologically-minded out of sheer necessity, because they had to eat what they grew. But we've lost touch with the garden as a food source."

What is theoretical for Mr. Haeg, of course, has become everyday reality for Michael Foti, who must live with his edible estate and arrive home from a long day at the office to prune and weed and smite caterpillars into the wee hours -- without pesticide, he is quick to note.

Mr. Foti is taking the garden one day at a time, A.A. style, a bit uneasy at the thought of waning daylight. The biggest pest, he noted, is "inertia." "We sometimes joke that it's the garden that ate our marriage," he said, then added wearily: "I do feel a certain pressure not to fail. The whole neighborhood is watching."

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