

Have Your Yard and Eat it Too

It demands food, water and constant attention, yet it gives so little in return. Wasteful in its water consumption and often laden with chemicals (for that “natural” green look), the suburban front lawn is a symbol of upwardly mobile Americana, and like many status symbols, it serves no real purpose other than to look pretty.

Los Angeles-based architect Fritz Haeg envisions a more functional use for the labor-intensive American front lawn, one that builds neighborhood interaction and encourages families to look at private land use in a new way.

Haeg’s project, the Edible Estates initiative, aims to replace resource-sapping front lawns with productive fruit and vegetable gardens. But why not in the back yard, where there’s some privacy? Haeg believes the front yard acts as a buffer, isolating people from the greater community just as its homogenous green carpet fosters mindless conformity. “It’s kind of a default reaction to an empty space to want to put a lawn there,” says the architect, who also founded the eco-themed gardenLAB program at Pasadena’s Art Center College of Design. Edible Estates are meant to do more than reinvent the uniform suburban landscape. “The project isn’t really about vegetable gardens and it’s not really about lawns,” says Haeg. “It’s about having a relationship with the environment and with other people.”

Fritz has planned nine Edible installations around the country, and two are already in place. As a follow-up to the inaugural garden sown in Salina, Kans. on July 4th of last year, the second Edible Estate now flourishes in Lakewood, Calif., 20 miles south of downtown LA. Michael and Jennifer Foti sacrificed their front lawn for more beans, patty pan squash and Hungarian cucumbers than they can consume, can or give away. Besides achieving near self-sufficiency produce-wise, Michael Foti’s new lawn has made him somewhat of a local celebrity, allowing him the chance to chat with many of his fellow Lakewood citizens on a daily basis. “You don’t really know what’s going on in the neighborhood unless you spend some time out there,” says Foti. “I didn’t want to look inward all the time. I want to look outward.”

For more information on the Edible Estates Initiative, or to volunteer your front lawn, visit fritzhaeg.com/garden/initiatives/edibleestates/main.html.

—JESSICA RIDENOUR