Green House Effect

Fritz Haeg's Edible Estates project transforms suburban front yards into sustainable gardens, empowering modern suburbanites and reconnecting them to their property, their produce and their planet.

By LUCINDA MICHELE KNAPP
Fritz Haeg’s Edible Estates project transforms suburban front yards into sustainable gardens, empowering modern suburbanites and reconnecting them to their property, their produce and their planet.

by LUCINDA MICHELE KNAPP

To forget how to dig the earth and to tend the soil is to forget ourselves.

-Mahatma G. Gandhi

Urban sociologist Mike Davis made an unfortunate blunder when he called L.A. “a city of vacant lots.” Davis’ dim view of Los Angeles’ present state could be blamed on his gross error. If we were indeed built on vacant lots, we would be in desperate need of sunglasses. As it happens, though, our city stands on some of the richest earth in North America, and living things can—technically—grow very well here. L.A.’s slyly shifting is actually a vast bowl of primordial runoff soil from the surrounding San Gabriel, Santa Monica and Santa Ana mountain ranges. In the geologic center of the Los Angeles basin, where the Los Angeles and Rio Hondo rivers merge in the city of South Gate, the rich alluvial dust extends an ever-zooming footprint that dwarfs the actual city itself. It seems vaguely somnambulant. The meter and rhythm of the earth’s annually spaced streets and strips of verdant Bermuda grass is soothing, lulling the urbanite—unused to this hypnotic regularity—into a calm little reverie. Could life really be this perfect? This Stephenville. I laugh out loud at my life to mistrust suburban’s soothing soda song. I feel around, shell-shocked and unblinking, in this neutrally and seductive environment, its precise concrete sidewalks solely removed from downtown’s entropy. L.A. is indeed paradise. Its ability to expand upwards and outwards without limit makes it easy to capture the possible and the perfect. It’s a city of infinite possible and perfect. It’s a city of endless possibility.

The Lakewood garden oasis is the second issuance of Haeg’s Edible Estates project. (The first happily burns away in Salina, Kansas.) It’s Haeg’s endeavor to change America’s mind about the role of the front yard and, in turn, the nature of community and society—by transforming a previously useless space into a garden, an oasis of green, or a small urban forest. The project is a call to action, to reconnect with the earth and to re-learn our place in the natural world. In any metropolitan area, it takes effort to remember that the landscape is part of a natural sphere, a life cycle, an organic system. We apply sunscreen, stay indoors or in cars—little biophores of conditioned air. We do not feel the earth under our bare feet—not even in our homes. Outside is dangerous, with no small portion of the ground and killer bees in the air. It’s particularly easy in Los Angeles to miss the seasonal changes: the jacarandas in summer, the sycamores turning yellow, the pears ripening around our ankles in autumn, Santa Ana winds, winter’s orange rain in eucalyptus trees, spring’s lemon blossoms and early lilacs. We do not often breathe deeply. City lights dim the stars and the phases of the moon into inconsequence. We are usually too busy staring at screens or steering wheels to look up at the sky or out at the land.

But the land is there. I’m one of the few L.A. natives who actually grow up with a small farm next door. In the west end of the San Fernando Valley in the 70s and 80s, some small, lonely little remnants of the built land pushed up exuberant spring wildflowers and hot summer mustard plants. My parents owned one such plot and we lived in a small, green house next door. On the quarter-acre of property we planted squash, corn, tomatoes, carrots, cantaloupe and eggplant. I played in the rows of dirt, pushing seeds into the earth with my stubby kid’s fingers, and gazed up at a decidedly gentler sun than today’s as the glazed yellow light through tall corn stalks swaying in an indistinct sea breeze off the Santa Monica Mountains. The earth wants to grow. All it needs is space.

Space is something most Angelenos don’t really think they have, and most of them never grew up with a garden or a room that was large enough to have them just outside the window. But Fritz Haeg’s Edible Estates project reminds us that we do have space we just ignore it. We forget it’s there. It’s our front lawn.

“Too much wrapped up in the front lawn, that empty piece of land,” explains Haeg when I visit him in his Mt. Washington home. His dogs, Ivy and Olive, are big and waggy and numbered at the prospect of tasting visitors. “No lucky, itty” admonishes Haeg, and a dejectedly flopped off the bench shed clambered up onto.

Fritz is tall, lithe, and has the graceful look of a regular yoga practitioner, with huge luminous eyes that lend themselves to the overall impression of an artistic visionary or a visitor from outer space. He explains the role of the lawn in Western society as a security blanket, aathlon in my ear. Curb appeal is a lot of issues about how you relate to your neighbors and how you relate to whatever place you live in. I think there’s a lot that’s deeply repressed by the lawn. When you have a lawn, you don’t really have to engage with your neighbors. They don’t engage with you. You don’t have to deal with them. You don’t have to deal with the place you’re in. You just dump a lot of water and plant grass on it.

Historically, “the lawn is a display of a form of wealth,” says Mark Alven, director of Machine Project, an interdisciplinary art gallery that will host a number of Edible Estates-related events in the fall. “The sod is doing well enough that there’s a lot of space to grow. It doesn’t have to be faked or grazed.”

The vast, elaborate gardens of European chateaux and palaces. An analogy would be in Los Angeles, where space is represented by how much water you can use in the middle of the desert for fountains. Allen channels Louis XIV and the cleansing, the obvious next-door neighbor of suburban legend simultaneously: “I’m so rich, look at my big green grass patch.”

“The project’s really the particular space that exists between you and the soil, and how you deal with it” Allen continues. As soon as you plant a garden you have to think, “What’s the climate going to do when it rains?”

What do I want to grow and what do I care about? You have to start thinking about who you are, where you live, what your neighbors want, how you eat—so as soon as you remove the lawn, everything that’s been repressed becomes revealed. It’s a very precious kind of space.”

Haeg chose the Lakewood home among six months of careful considerations. The garden should be in a neighborhood where it would have the maximum impact. The garden should be in a neighborhood where it would have the maximum impact. The garden should be in a neighborhood where it would have the maximum impact. The garden should be in a neighborhood where it would have the maximum impact. The garden should be in a neighborhood where it would have the maximum impact. The garden should be in a neighborhood where it would have the maximum impact.

The upstanding citizens of Lakewood watched with a mixture of shock and fear as the Peri family (Fritz and Karon) and Fritz Haeg broke every rule laid down to the suburban home dweller. Thou shalt not plant corn, thou shalt not plant tomatoes, thou shalt not plant squash, thou shalt not plant any other vegetable. Thou shalt not grow any other vegetable. Thou shalt not grow any other vegetable. Thou shalt not grow any other vegetable. Thou shalt not grow any other vegetable. Thou shalt not grow any other vegetable.
The drive to the "burbs takes me two and a half hours in supermarket checkout-line traffic, and I pull into Lakewood a full half-hour late. The city is resurfacing the Folti street, and it raffles my jaw like an old dirt road might, but the identical rows of houses on either side and their flawless, manicured lawns iterate that, rough road or not, this is Suburbia™. I can see the Folti's home from far away as the stalks of corn strike upwards toward the eggshell-pale sky. Parking my little car covered with rock and mulch sticks, I feel as out of place on this street as the garden.

The Foltis are in the front yard: June, age 7, rolling through it with the energy of childhood loosed upon a similarly wild object, and the more restrained Cecilia, who is 13, standing up from tending a plant. "They are" a blend of shy, self-absorbed and go-getter native to young women her age. She walks me into the door to their father, Michael Folti. It is here, amid the family dynamics and the Folti's tidy house with its spare, modern interior, (why did I expect dusty English rose décor and paintings of green with borders, I don't know), that another truth about this garden becomes clear: It's not just Fritz's art/design/concept project.

"It's their front yard, for crying out loud. You put your failibility in the line, with a project like this, it could turn into an eyesore very quickly," explains Mike, who spends his non-gardening hours as a computer programmer. He looks too young to have a middle-school-age daughter, with his beaming Opie cheeks and a lopsided smile. But behind his wire-rimmed glasses, all is well. His wife, Jenny, joins us as we talk; the sun dips lower, and a sea breeze washes across the suburban grid outside.

"The first month, I spent a lot more time in the garden than I needed to," continues Mike. "It put strain on my wife, I can be very obsessive." Jenny shoots me a long-suffering look. "The upside of it is the physical activity, and the convenience of fresh vegetables," she says. "But the downside—it's just not the driving force for me that it is for him." Gardening isn't for everyone, in other words.

"I'd like people to understand it's not gonna be instant gratification," says Jules Derwaes of Pasadena, an "urban homesteader" who, with his family, converted their own home into a virtually self-sustaining city lot where they brew their own biodiesel, provide organic greens to local restaurants, and teach workshops on everything from permaculture to knitting. They began their process in the '80s. "It's like a baby: it needs more attention in the beginning. Only after a few years does it garden start walking on its own... be prepared for failures and setbacks. We've had one blueberry one year. One. I told my kids, with all the work we put into it, this is a $100 blueberry," says Derwaes.

"It takes a lot of work to have a vegetable garden, to plant edibles like this, and it's a lot more work than a lawn," admits Haeg, whose own hillside backyard behind his geodesic-dome topped home is planted with fruit trees, a grapevine, and other productive plants. "But that's the point: anything as easy as having a lawn—there unhealthy side effects to anything that mindless, where you don't have to pay attention."

Mike Folti says as much to me, "I don't get this concept of a 'low maintenance' lifestyle. I don't think it's good for people. It makes you withdraw from your fellow man."

The Edible Estates project has indeed prompted countless connections for the Foltis who, no one would otherwise have been, from me shoveling up at their front door, to attention from local news outlets, online visitors to their website, and the New York Times, to quote possibly some of the most important connections: their own neighbors. "Most of the people around here really like it. People walk by from this street, from the next one over, and then from farther and farther," says Mike. "They make special trips to drive by when they hear about it."

"When you live in a community like Lakewood, that has 30,000 front lawns," says Folti, "and you remove one of them, hopefully that's a catalyst, and it starts people thinking about other possibilities. So the project is partly utopian, saying why can't we all do this? But it's also kind of an absurd conceptual project, saying how pathetic it is that we live the way we do, that something like this is so radical. How bizarre that it's radical to be planting food in your yard? It's shocking, and to some people, quite unseemly."

"There are few who don't really like it," says Mike as he walks me through the garden's three varieties.
of eggplant, their leaves edged in violet. That basil exuberantly outgrowing the edges of the planter, sage, chamomile, peppers, artichokes. "I have a hard time understanding why it would be such a transcendent act," he shrugs. The sunset throws the corn into relief against the soft yellow sunset, and the sea breeze cools significantly. My heart softens a little bit toward Lakewood as I count the petty-pun squash hidden beneath wide, heart-shaped leaves, and Mike points out kumquat, plum, pomelo and Eureka lemon trees. It seems easier to breathe next to this dense little plot of vibrantly alive organisms. Jenny brings a bag of cucumbers for me to smell. "It's great for the plants," she begins, "...and it smells like chocolate!" volunteers June, careening by. I stick my face into the bag and inhale. It's rich and peppery—and yes, smoky with the aroma of chocolate. The mulch deters pests and keeps the soil light. Like Mike, I find it hard to understand what could be disagreeable about the project. Apparently there are just a few grumblers, worried about property values.

Haag says of the bigger picture, "The project can be described as reconciling global food production and land use issues, with a little modest garden. In another way the garden is just a vehicle to talk about something else. It's not really about gardens or food—it's about our relationship to each other and to the environment."

But it also is about gardens and food. This little front-yard plot has transcended Haag's purposes for it (which may have been his intention all along, as an artist), just as much as its greater symbolism transcends Lakewood's few naysayers. As much as this may have started as Haag's conceptual art project, it's become a prosecco and profoundly human-scale organism.

"It's enhanced our relationships with a lot of our neighbors," says Mike. "We've shared the produce with as many friends and neighbors as possible. And we've just finished canning. Canning feels like honest, productive work. It's been fun for me and my wife to do together." He smiles.

"With a garden, wisdom comes in little increments," explains Jules Dervaes, when I speak with him over the phone. "People know a long time ago, and we have forgotten. Maybe a century ago most people were farmers, and now our kids aren't even outside. They're not playing in the yard, you don't see them out in the streets or climbing trees—they're driven indoors, and it's not right or healthy. With wacky weather and oil shortages, people are looking for something close to home where they can get security. I compare it to the World War II victory gardens. When the nation was in trouble, people said, 'What can we do?' Farmers went bankrupt, oil prices go up—it's not a bad idea to have stability here at home. In a period of disquiet and upheaval, people go back to what's real and what they can hold onto. My kids wanted to protest and save people taking to the streets during the G7 summits...you wanna be in control, you plant something. Your capacity to change is right there."

In his own home, Fritz Haag is thinking about new projects. "With all my work I'm interested in how people can take what little control they do have, and put that to use. One of the few things we have in a capitalist society is private property. And while a lot of utopian artists and designers have been interested in focusing on public property, my projects are about saying, 'Okay, we don't really have empowered public spaces; instead let's take our little private spaces and activate them.' Let's use that private space for larger societal issues."

To that end, Haag is opening his own home for a collaborative educational endeavor called the Sundown Schoolhouse (he lives on Sundown Street). Like the Edible Estates project, the plan is to bring together people who might not otherwise have met, with the intention of igniting creative energy. But instead of meeting over peppers and squash, students will come together over co-created meals, self-published periodicals, the migratory paths of plant life, psychiatric journalism, [coored], dance, art and sand castles at Zuma Beach. Classes will be led by Mark Herbst (co-editor of The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest), Emily Boyden (Lesbi ans to the Rescue), Mark Allen (Machine Project), members of the Center for Tactical Magic, the Los Angeles Urban Gardens, the Institute for Figuring and even the students themselves.

"I think everyone feels a sense of uselessness right now, a sense that we're drifting off in directions that we don't have control over anymore," says Haag. "That as individuals we don't feel even remotely empowered to do anything about. Making any dent in it is like turning a huge ship around that's headed in the wrong direction...using your home as more than a place for you to live in alone, or with your family, and opening it up to the public for other functions so people can gather and connect with each other—people leave energized, feeling like they're part of something bigger. And with Edible Estates I think it's the same thing, taking that piece of private land that you own and using that land to declare how you want to live, and how you want to be part of the world around you."

It's intriguing to see how Edible Estates functions as catalyst, artistic statement and corporeal garden all at once, and by artistic statement and corporeal garden all at once, and by poetic statement and corporeal garden all at once, and poetic statement and corporeal garden all at one