Homeowner Clarence Ridgley kneels in his front yard, which has been converted into an edible garden where grass once grew.

Kim Hairston [Sun Photographer]

Stay off the grass

Fritz Haeg campaigns to turn front lawns into incredible, edible yards

BY ANDREA F. SIEGEL

Clarence Ridgley points out to a neighbor the herb patch, the baby broccoli plants surrounded by onions and his mini-orchard.

Nothing unusual. These are staples of a backyard garden. But this is a front yard in Baltimore. Drivers slow to stare. All the stumpy single-family houses from the 1930s and 1940s on this city street west of Druid Hill Park line up behind their green lawns. Except, now, Clarence and Rudine Ridgley's red brick and clapboard home is behind fruit trees, tomato cages, berry bushes and vegetables.

"I could do a lot with those green herbs," says Kendall Hicks, a neighbor who works as a chef. "I am going to have to keep an eye on him," laughs Clarence Ridgley.

This is art — designed as food for thought, not merely for the stomach.

For creator Fritz Haeg, the Ridgley house is the sixth installment in his ongoing project called Edible Estates, an agricultural experiment that is much about people as it is about plants. It is an architectural-artist-environmental-landscape-social-political challenge that has homeowners swapping out grass for greens, a lawn for lunch.

Haeg is a Los Angeles-based architect by profession and an activist gardener by choice. His book, Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn, was just published and the Whitney Museum in New York is exhibiting his work as part of an biennial.

Edible Estates has changed front yards since 2005, starting in Salinas, Kan., nearly the geographic center of the United States. From there Haeg moved on to London and Maplewood, N.J., among other cities, before coming to Baltimore as part of the Contemporary Museum's Getzville Industry, which features six artistic expressions that take place on sites in the community. Set to open May 31, the exhibit will chronicle the Ridgley's yard with photographs as it grows.

What Haeg is proposing around the country — around the world — is nothing short of sedition in many a community.

Forget the monoculture vanity lawn that seals you, the homeowner, from the public and looks like every other useless patch of green upon which people expend time, money and chemicals. Instead, establish an organic harvestable landscape out front, with fruiting trees and vegetable Servers, from which you, the locavore (those who favor food grown within their region), can feed your family.

"A lawn cuts across all social and political strata. It's our common experience," Haeg says. But he wants people to rethink that.

For Ridgley, 59, a plastic bottle manufacturing supervisor, the project has roots in his online noodling for blueberry bushes to add to his backyard garden. He came across a notice that Haeg and the museum were seeking a Baltimorean lawn to replace. He garden, eats his tomatoes off the vine, so why not be figured. His application was accepted.

On Fridays, Haeg, Ridgley and volunteers lay weed blocker over the grass and began to create a landscape of circular raised beds and a bamboo trellis for pole beans. On Saturday, with the help of 20 volunteers of all ages, a garden emerged.

Volunteer Shannon Young, 48, a digital arts graduate student at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, gently sculpted raised beds around a thumbs-high lettuce plants, as Haeg watered the mounds. Nearby, a few of the Ridgley's grandchildren helped tidy up as others pressed the last of the veggies into the soil and Clarence Ridgley gave mini-tours to neighbors. Taking a breather on the shady brick porch, Rudine Ridgley surveyed the scene, steps down, envisioning the yard in the height of season.

"I can be like the Barefoot Contessa," she said, referring to the Garden, the Food Network celebrity cook. "I can go out in my garden and get some herbs."

But right now the yard looks like a biodegradable brown with splashes of green poking out. Between the walkway and the drive, the way stand fruit trees and blueberry bushes, but unseen are edible flower seeds that will add color and texture as the days warm.

"This is going to be great," he said.

But could it be here reading my newspaper and eating figs," said Clarence Ridgley, whose next-door neighbor said his raspberries and grapes could grow into her fence.

"I'm going to have to change mine. I want mine to look as nice as his," muses Wilhelmina McNeil, 67, a retired dental assistant, as she looked from one side of her fence to the other. "The garden raised a few eyebrows. Some people were ready to follow suit, others not. Will the garden bring cute animals or un-desirable ones? Will vandalism trample it? How breaking is this re-planning, anyway? Out-front edibles are not for every neighborhood. That's none

for Ridgley, president of his Callaway Garrion Improvement Association. It's a neighborhood group, not a reputation-intensive homeowners group where rene

Edible Estates idea hit him after the polarizing 2004 election. He wondered about common ground. The project is "at the con

and pollution, food costs, globalization.

For Clarence Ridgley, the recent planting ends 22 years of manipulating his front lawn, yanking weeds here, edging there, fertilizing every-where. But it won't end the friendly neighborhood war over whose front yard is best.

Don Brock, across the street, claims to have won last year. This summer, Ridgley says, he'll "brow their out of the water" with a front yard lush with armloads of bronz

and I hope he continues in that tradition.

andrea.siegel@baltsun.com