



High-rise harvest

The irresistible growth of the urban farm

Joël Robuchon

What Gordon Ramsay learnt from me

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Food Special

The kitchen queen

A formidable Frenchwoman is set to be crowned Britain's top female chef. All hail Helene Darroze!

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Before:
the communal area
in front of a housing
estate in London's
Elephant and Castle



The urban farmer

One man's crusade to plough up the inner city

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PORTRAIT BY MEGAN QUINN

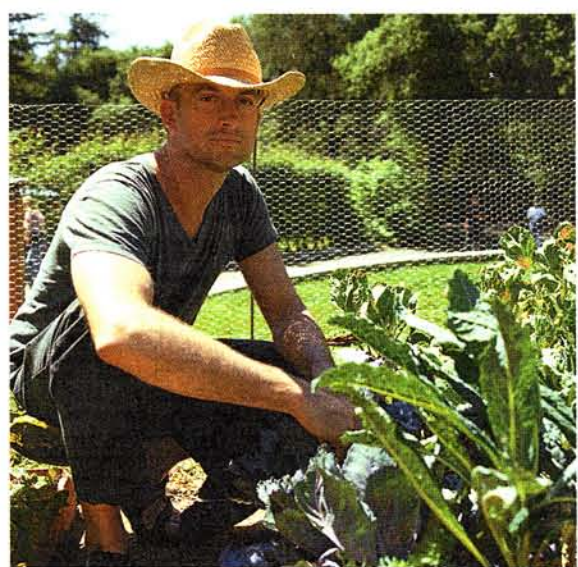
Fritz Haeg isn't perhaps the obvious representative of a revolution in global farming. As an architecture and design academic and practitioner, the American has had his work exhibited at Tate Modern and the Whitney Museum of American Art, and has taught fine art at several US universities. Yet it is last year's community-collaborative project on an inner-city council estate in south London that best showcases his current passion: the urban farm.

Last April, in a discussion about the global food crisis, Gordon Brown announced: "We need to make great changes in the way we organise food production in the next few years." High on the list of viable changes is the idea of inner-city agriculture. Which is the theory behind Haeg's concept, detailed in his new book *Edible Estates*: it proposes the replacement of the domestic front lawn in cities with "an edible landscape". Last year, to illustrate this point, Haeg was commissioned by the Tate to create a permanent "edible estate" on a triangle of communal grass in front of a housing estate near Elephant and Castle, bordered on two sides by a main road along which London buses thunder every few minutes.

The aim was to engage and involve the local residents – and together they miraculously transformed a patch of grass previously favoured by dogs and drunks into a luscious agri-plot housing apple and plum trees, a "forest" of tomato plants, aubergines, squashes, Brussels sprouts, runner beans, sweet peas, a "salad wing", herbs, edible flowers and 6ft artichoke plants. It is also quite beautiful: "The design was inspired by the ornate, curvy raised flowerbeds you find in front of Buckingham Palace," explains Haeg. Interestingly, although this space is still accessible by passers-by – unlike the traditional allotment, which Haeg feels is outdated – there has been no theft or vandalism. The London project was mirrored in several locations around the US.



After: the space has been transformed by residents and Fritz Haeg (below)



"All the projects I do are rooted in the way that an architect thinks and works," says Haeg. "How we live and the spaces we make for ourselves." And right now, he believes, we need to re-evaluate exactly that, and urgently so – particularly in our overcrowded cities.

As part of its "One Planet Living" initiative, the World Wildlife Fund calculated our average personal carbon footprint in Britain. Perplexingly, it found that food production and its transport accounts for our greatest use of carbon – 23 per cent per person – beating personal transport, home energy and even shared services (the running of schools, hospitals, banks and so on). These results, combined with food shortages and escalating costs – the price of apples and eggs has risen by 30 per cent in the past year – mean action must be taken, says Haeg. Ornamental urban space is a luxury we can

no longer afford, he believes: we need to be growing food on our lawns, greens, driveways and even public parks.

Haeg is not the only one to think it is time for change. The global Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) strategic alliance estimates that, by 2015, more than half the world's population will be living in urban areas, provoking one of the greatest challenges in the history of agriculture as we try to find a way to keep a lid on food miles and produce enough food for everyone. "Now, more than ever," urges Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming, "we need to grow more food closer to where people live." And in this climate, it seems that everyone from town planners to head teachers, TV chefs to agri-entrepreneurs are getting excited about farming food in the big smoke.

But is it realistic to turn over our spare urban soil to the cause – and is there really enough of it to do so? Erik Watson, an urban design director at the town-planning company Turley Associates, strongly believes that inner-city agriculture is the future. As such, he is already advising his clients on ways to incorporate farming into their developments and is particularly excited about the potential for transforming existing space enclosed in the traditionally British city structure, the "perimeter block" (a row of buildings constructed around an enclosed, private square – typically divided into private gardens). "Look at an aerial view of London and you'll see there's an enormous amount of private open space contained within these blocks. It is perfect for this urban agricultural revolution," he says.

Re-apportioning private space might not be as far-fetched as it sounds. Later this month Sustain is hosting a conference, called Growing Food for London, where ideas to be aired include the possibilities of using derelict council facilities, social housing land and unused private gardens for commercial agriculture, as well as the planting of fruit and nut trees in parks and along roads, creating community

gardens in public parks and replacing ornamental plants with edible crops. It will also look at alternative food production such as mushroom growing, beekeeping and planting edibles in window boxes, as well as ideas for the little-explored area of rearing livestock in urban areas.

While beekeeping is on the rise in British cities – it is estimated that there are 5,000 beehives in London alone – other urban animal-based edibles are rare. Hunting might be the answer here – squirrel meat has already been seized upon as a sustainable, free-range delicacy in rural Cornwall – could it catch on in cities? Might pigeon pie become a Trafalgar Square speciality; has anyone thought of fox cutlets?

Perhaps more realistic is organised urban livestock rearing. "There are issues with planning – noise pollution and so on," says Zeenat Anjani from Sustain, "but you could definitely raise chickens and other small animals. We hope the Growing Food conference will open more people's minds to these sorts of ideas and get the right people in the same room to talk about what they can do."

Many are already talking about it. Inspired by the "victory gardens" of the First and Second World Wars, when civilians were urged to "dig for victory" to survive the food shortages, Jamie Oliver's newest venture is to inspire the residents of inner-city Rochdale to eat like our wartime forebears and grow their own, while Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's new *River Cottage* series challenges five Bristol families to transform a derelict patch of land into a fruitful smallholding.

In Middlesborough, the Groundwork South Tees trust has begun an urban-farming education programme to teach people how to cultivate herbs, vegetables and fruit even if they do not have a garden, by providing containers for patios, balconies and windowsills. There are also sustainable-food grants available to those who want to educate others how to produce their own food in cities, and how to compost effectively to improve typically poor-quality urban soil. →

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Honey, I ate the lawn: an edible garden takes shape in New Jersey (above); and California (below); civilians were encouraged to 'dig for victory' during the Second World War (bottom right)



If it comes off, perhaps one of the most high-profile initiatives – still at bid stage – is the Feed the Olympics proposal. It is a radical blueprint from several green organisations outlining how 6,000 acres of land in London could be put to work to grow enough food to provide the 14m-odd meals that will be needed during the 60 days of the 2012 Games, instead of importing it. This would involve creating 2,012 new food-growing spaces across the capital, including community gardens, allotments and roof gardens.

Revolutionary? In this country, yes – but we're lagging behind countries such as China, Japan and Cuba, which already have farms integrated into the social, economic and physical structures of their cities; as early as a decade ago Beijing town planners had begun to incorporate agriculture into the urban landscape. The Chinese government also offers courses to aspiring urban farmers and plans to cultivate gardens on nearly 10,000,000sq ft of roof space over the next 10 years.

Similarly, Argentina's Programa de Agricultura Urbana (PAU) was set up to support city-based farmers in the aftermath of the country's financial collapse. And in Cuba, when the US-led trade embargo resulted in severe food shortages, the government responded by investing in urban farms, providing state-owned plots and teaching relevant skills in schools.

But will it work in Britain? Carole Wright, who manages the communal garden created by Haeg in south London, says it already is. "It cost less than £5,000 to create and it is capable of feeding three blocks of flats with 24 households each," she says. "We run family gardening sessions, Sunday sessions, after-school clubs and also container gardening, so residents can grow things on their balconies too. High-density housing is no barrier – you can grow things out of an old baked-bean can. The more people we can get, the more we can produce. It's not about the size of the land – it's about the maintenance." She has had no shortage of regular, enthusiastic volunteers – surprisingly most of whom are children.

Wright was delighted when one girl, a moody teenager who described herself as a "cybergoth", grew her own beetroot. "You'd never have known she was excited about it," says Wright, "but I spotted her one evening with her friends, holding the thing in her hands. 'What are you doing with that?' I asked. 'Well,' she said, 'I grew it – I wanted to show my mates.' She comes down every day now to water her sunflowers."

It's not just about financial and health benefits – Wright has also noticed social benefits. "People who have not spoken for five years are suddenly chatting again, discussing what they've grown. And it brings together people from different cultures too – they lean over the fence and reminisce about the vegetables they grew in their countries as children – okra, bananas, yams, sweet potatoes."

Could squirrel hunting catch on in the city? Has anyone thought of fox cutlets?

Wright describes one gardener, an elderly widow, who has planted an almond tree as a memorial to her late husband and says he would have loved to see how the space had been transformed. "One guy has even replaced the photo of his family on his mobile phone with a picture of the garden. It's given them so much pride."

The impact of the garden has been enormous, says Wright. People from further and further away are coming along to get involved, learn new skills and socialise. "They see it and it's like a lightbulb and they say, 'We want our own edible estate.' Well, it makes sense, doesn't it?" ■

Pie in the sky? The world's first edible high-rise

The potential of city-based farming could be vastly expanded if we extend upwards as well as using ground-level plots.

Of course, one major problem with growing produce on our roofs is the quantities of soil needed, which would add unfeasible amounts of weight. However, hydroponic technology – using nutrient-enriched

water instead of soil – could be the solution.

Toronto scientist Gordon Graff has created plans for a 58-floor concept building – the SkyFarm (pictured) – which would grow crops in the heart of the city and could provide enough food for 35,000 people every day. Crops would be irrigated by water recycled through the building's hydroponic system and, with no soil, many diseases are ruled out – meaning no need for chemical pesticides.

Rumours abound of a similar skyscraper farm being developed in Las Vegas. It is said that the 30-storey structure would be not just about agriculture, but would house pigs too – though some have suggested the vertical pork farm could be a hoax. Punchlines on a postcard, please. **KB**

