BY MOLLY ROSE KAUFMAN  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

A man in a gray SUV pulled over to ask a woman in a cowboy hat what was happening on the usually quiet Maplewood street. "We're planting a vegetable garden," said Michelle Christiansen, the one in the hat. The driver smiled at Christiansen's front yard, where friends and neighbors were uprooting her grass. Small children were digging with plastic shovels and someone was trying to get a rototiller to start.

"You got enough people helping?" the man asked, intrigued.

Christiansen, 39, and her husband, Christopher Wel, 35, learned a few weeks earlier that they were chosen for architect Pete Haag's Edible Estates project. This year of events has been slowly changing their lives. It took much less time for it to change their lawn: three days.

They are now part of Haag's crusade against grassy front lawns. The L.A.-based architect dislikes lawns because they require many resources and increase pollution (when people use lawnmowers and pesticides). Haag who says lawns are socially isolating undervalue and could serve a more practical purpose.

"Food grown in our front yards will connect us to the seasons, the organic cycles of the earth and our neighbors," Haag wrote in the Manifesto that explains the benefits of Edible Estates, his grass alternative.

Through Edible Estates, Haag provides the garden design, supplies and volunteers for garden families who are willing to get rid of their grass and grow food instead. Christiansen, who runs her own organic baby food company, Chewbaby, applied as soon as she heard that Haag was looking for a family in the New York area.

Once she'd been chosen, Christiansen called volunteers from a Maplewood-based online community and Haag called on his friends from New York City to come out and dig. Gardeners' Supply, a gardening and landscaping supply company in Vermont, donated plants, because by early July, it was too late in the season to start planting with seeds. Haag estimated that more than $10,000 worth of materials were donated for the project.

"It's kind of like a barn raising," [See LAWN, Page 61]