Redefining American Beauty, by the Yard

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

WHEN Cecilia Foti, a seventh grader at the Bancroft Middle School here, was asked to write a “persuasive” essay for her English class in the spring semester, she did not choose a topic deeply in tune with her peers — the pros and cons of school uniforms, say, or the district’s retro policy on chewing gum and cellphones.

Instead, she addressed the neighborhood’s latest controversy: her family’s front yard. “The American lawn needs to be eradicated from our society and fast!” she wrote, explaining that her family had replaced its own with a fruit and vegetable garden. She argued for the importance of water conservation, the dangers of pesticides and the dietary benefits and visual appeal of an edible yard. “Was the Garden of Eden grass?” she reasoned. “No.”

In this quintessential 1950’s tract community about 25 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles, the transformation of the Foti family’s front yard from one of grass to one dense with pattypan squash plants, cornstalks, millionaire eggplants, crimson sweet watermelons, dwarf curry trees and about 195 other edible varieties has been startling.

Edible landscaping, which dates to Washington, has a revival.

“The empty front lawn requiring mowing, watering and weeding previously on this location has been removed,” reads a placard set amid veggies in oval planting beds fronting the street.

The sign is a not-so-subtle bit of propaganda proclaiming the second and most recent installment of Edible Estates, an experimental project by Fritz Haeg, a 37-year-old Los Angeles architect and ersatz Frederick Law Olmsted. The project, which he inaugurated on the Fourth of July weekend in 2005 in a front yard in Salina, Kan., is part of a nascent “delawning” movement concerned with replacing lawns around the country with native plants, from prairie grasses in suburban Chicago to cactus gardens in Tucson.

It is a kind of high-minded version of “Extreme Make-

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Tomatoes where the grass used to be?
Neighbors are upset.

"I am looking to think differently about this space," Mr. Foit said of the family's once-plain front yard. "I want to look outward rather than inward."

The demolishing was accomplished over Memorial Day weekend by a SWAT team of some 15 recruits who read about the project on Mr. Haeg's Web site. Mr. Haeg arrived armed with three rented sod cutters, a rototiller and a dozen rakes and shovels, and within three days the yard was transformed.

The new garden has caused much rumbling in the neighborhood, a pine-cone community originally built after World War II for returning G.I.'s where colorful windsocks and plastic yard butterflies prevail. Some neighbors fret about a potential decline in property values, while others worry that all those succulent fruits and vegetables will attract drive-by thieves — as well as spousers and other varmints — in pursuit of Maioni's and Brandywine tomatoes.

But the biggest concern seems to be the breeching of an unspoken perimeter. "What happens in the backyard is your business," said a 44-year-old high-voltage lineman who lives down the street and who would give only his last name, "But this doesn't seem to me to be a front yard kind of a deal!"

"In spite of its contemporary media-savvy title, Edible Estates is a throwback to the early 20th century, when yards were widely regarded as utilitarian spaces, particularly in working-class neighborhoods. As recently as the 1920s and 1930s, decorative lawns — which in this country date back at least to George Washington's Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello — were still largely the province of the elite, according to Ted Steinberg, a historian at Case Western Reserve and the author of the new book "American Green: The Evolution of an Idea for the Perfect Lawn." (W. W. Norton.) The yard was for putting food on the table, Dr. Steinberg said, in the form of vegetables, goats, rabbits and small livestock.

It was not until the postwar period that the notion of the lawn as the "natural landscape" developed as a vehicle for upward mobility, with zoning setbacks designed to encourage "law"- and "dandelion-free perfection — "the living version of broadloom carpeting," Dr. Steinberg said.

While backyards remained private, the front yard evolved into "a ceremonial space that appears effortlessly and without labor," said Margaret Crawford, a professor of urban design and planning theory at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. "In working-class neighborhoods," she said, "the idea of actually using the front yard is extremely unusual."

Mr. Haeg, who was raised in suburban Minneapolis, now lives in a geodesic dome in East Los Angeles with a subterranean sprayed-concrete cave worthy of Dr. No. Covered in mouse-breath asphalt shingles, it dates to 1984; he found it on the Internet in 2000. Soon after he moved in, he began cultivating edible plants like kale and pineapple guava in his terraced garden, and he surrounded the dome with trellises for grapevines.

Mr. Haeg is perhaps best known in Los Angeles for his Sundown Salons, which transform his three-level, shag-carpeted home into an alternative cultural space that attracts artists, other architects, recent M.F.A. graduates and resident gourmets. The theme and tone of the once-a-month gatherings, which began shortly after he moved in, have varied; they've included traditional literary gatherings as well as gay and lesbian performance art and all-night knitting and "make your own pets animal" sessions.

Mr. Haeg has taught at several colleges, including the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., where he oversees his students' design and construction of Gardenlab, a campus community garden, beginning in 2001. He is now designing a house for a film executive in the Silver Lake section of Los Angeles and a rooftop garden for an apartment complex in downtown Los Angeles.

Mr. Haeg selected Salina as his first Edible Estates site for its heartland symbolism — it is close to the geographic center of the country — and found his first subjects, Stan and Fritzi Cox, through the Land Institute, a Salina-based organization dedicated to ecologically sustainable agriculture, where Mr. Cox works on a plant generic.

"I don't feel any excitement," Ms. Cox, 35, said of her dutiful sod expense. "It was monotonous. Now my senses are stimulated."

Mr. Haeg is planning seven more Edible Estates sites. (Counting soon: Baltimore and Minneapolis.) Though he lacks training in landscape architecture or horticulture, he has been shrewd in his recruitment of plants like people with sunny, treeless front yards.

So far each "estate" has been planted to nuts and fruits: the garden in Kansas is heavy with okra and corn, with a smattering of bitter guard, pineapple and carry trees in deference to Mr. Cox's Indian roots. The Foy's yard in California is resplendent with pomelos, oranges, mandarins and other citrusfruits.

Mr. Haeg regards the Edible Estates project as something of a marathon. He fantasizes about setting off a "chain reaction" among gardeners that would challenge Americans to rethink their laws — which he insists on calling "pre-edible" landscapes — though he knows the chances are slim. Still, he wants to make a point.

"Diversity is healthy," he said. "The pioneers were ecologically-minded out of sheer necessity, because they had to eat what they grew. But we're lost touch with the garden as a food source."

What is theoretical for Mr. Haeg, of course, has become everyday reality for Michael Foli, who must live with his edible estate and arrive home from a long day at the office to prune and prune caterpillars into the wee hours — without pesticide, he is quick to note.

Mr. Foli is taking the garden one day at a time, A.A. style, a bit uneasy at the thought of warming day's lightest. The biggest pest, he noted, is the "wee.""We sometimes joke that it's the garden that are our marriage," he said, then added wistfully: "I do feel a certain pressure not to fail. The whole neighborhood is watching."