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ON THE COVER
An enormous red cabbage is just one of the vegetables that replace the lawn in front of Clarence Ridgley's Baltimore home. Photograph by Rob Cardillo

No Lawn, Just Food

Designer: Fritz Haeg

Fritz Haeg designs gardens that flip the traditional suburban landscape on its ear: He rips up front lawns and plants fruits and vegetables in their place. And once the owners—and their neighbors—get used to the sight of corn growing by the front door, they love it.

Haeg is an artist, architect, and author. His art project, *Edible Estates*, turns the grass in front of a house—that monotonous, conformist patch of green—into something that engages a neighborhood, changing how the residents think about their landscapes. Which is the point.

In his book, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, Haeg chronicles the conversion of four urban and suburban American front yards and explains how the experience changed the owners and the neighborhoods. Haeg describes the traditional lawn as “a highly visible space that was mostly unoccupied, time-consuming, polluting, wasteful, and even socially divisive.” He transforms the turf “with a little gardening and good will, into a productive space that feeds families with the healthiest local food while reconnecting them to their environment and neighbors.”

One Garden

Clarence Ridgley’s Baltimore garden illustrates this philosophy. Vegetables, fruit trees, and berry bushes reach toward the sun—an island of bounty amid a sea of grass. Ridgley’s property was chosen through a program by Baltimore’s Contemporary Museum. Like other *Edible Estate* gardens, Ridgley’s front yard was all lawn.

Thirty kinds of organically grown fruits and vegetables later, there’s a mini-orchard and a seating area surrounded by strawberries and tomatoes. Herbs are scattered among Swiss chard, cabbages, and a tiny “meadow” of edible flowers. Squash and watermelons bask in the sun, and beans climb a bamboo tripod.

Now in its third year, Ridgley’s garden measures 33 by 51 feet. Neighbors haven’t complained about the vegetable garden. On the contrary: Ridgley was anticipating the first tomato of the season, but a neighbor got to it before he did.

The Design

To create the garden, Haeg and Ridgley smothered the lawn with thick layers of newspaper and then topped it with a soil-compost mixture. Circular mounds of the mixture function as unframed raised beds. Wood chips define pathways. The plants make up the design of the garden; the lack of paving, structures, and other elements of hardscaping is a choice. Haeg calls it a deliberate move away from materialism and an obsession with things.

“It’s not about super-fancy, aspirational, perfect garden designs,” Haeg says. “I try



to make the gardens real and modest, so people with modest means can do it.”

As for what to grow, Haeg’s palette is broad: any plant that grows in that climate. It’s as diverse as possible, and takes into consideration the likes and dislikes of the family. The first year, the garden is mostly Haeg’s vision. After that, it becomes the owners’.

The artist believes that growing food in front of the house is an opportunity to welcome and interact with other people. Ridgley says that neighbors he didn’t know pre-garden stop to visit and comment on its progress. It’s an experience to watch it transform from bare dirt to an attractive, productive garden. And it takes time. “It’s not reality TV—instantly there,” he says. “It’s seeds. People watch it grow from nothing into something.”

“People make their gardens more complicated and expensive than they need to be,” states Haeg. “I keep it simple, cheap, and easy, so people think, ‘I can do that, or better.’” —*Therese Ciesinski*

“Anyone should feel qualified to go out and plant food in their front yards.”



Clarence Ridgley and his children David and Anna enjoy the bounty of the garden, which includes Brussels sprouts, tomatoes, grapes, and beets.