

San Francisco Chronicle | 5.10.2008 | Section H

# THE MONTE

& Garden





## THE KITCHEN GARDENER

## Author: Manicured lawns are pretty, but not 'green'

By Glen Helfand  
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Haeg opts for 'Edible Estates': cutting the grass in favor of gardens

To children of suburbia, the lawn is perhaps our first hands-on experience of nature.

It's the green expanse we, as kids, tended, perhaps for a bit of extra allowance, by weeding or mowing. And yet, like so much landscaping, its form is hardly natural, being shaped by American social structures, real estate imperatives, chemical fertilizers and herbicides.

To rethink this front-of-the-house space as the home of more useful plant life brushes up against surprisingly solid foundations, and it's the impetus for "Edible Estates," the eco-activist project and book of architect and conceptual artist Fritz Haeg, who creates transformations of ornamental turf to crop-bearing front yards. With the subtitle, "Attack on the Front Lawn," Haeg acknowledges just how revolutionary the idea strikes many American homeowners; there's a place for everything, and the social structure of the suburban landscape places manicured grass front and center.

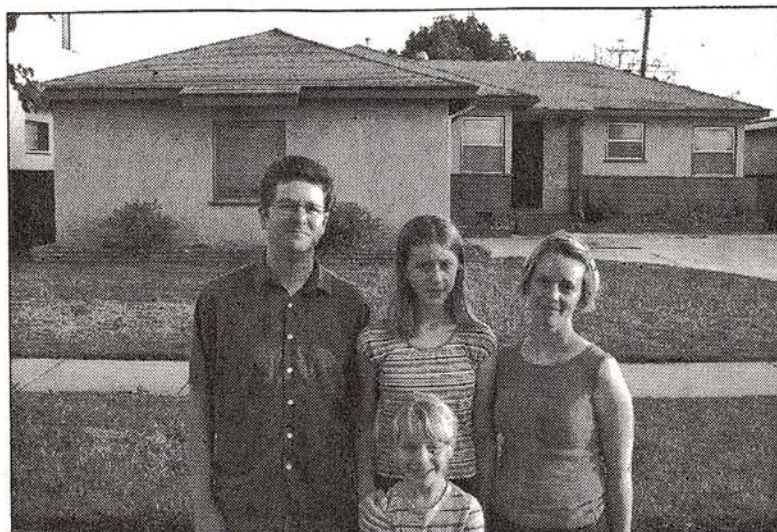
The book reveals the reasons, many of them class-based and inherited from our British forebears.

"The front lawn was born of vanity and decadence, under the assumption that fertile land was infinite," Haeg writes in his introduction, pointing to how a vast patch of green highlights the majesty of the manor.

Both notions bring up current concerns about sustainability; we're increasingly realizing that the earth indeed has its limits and that homes are part of a delicate balance of finances, resources, government regulations and unspoken neighborhood values.

In the United States, the lawn's ubiquity is about pride in the home, as well as in creating open, democratic greenery (even when most outdoor suburban living takes place in the backyard).

An entertaining 1991 essay by Michael Pollan is reprinted in the book, bringing his usual incisive social and ecological insights, as well as autobiographical garden-



FRITZ HAEG

**BEFORE** Michael Foti of Lakewood (Los Angeles County), with his family.



FRITZ HAEG

**BEFORE** The first "Edible Estate" regional prototype garden was planted in Salina, Kan., in 2005.

ing anecdotes, to a polemic against lawn mowing. He invokes neighborhood landscaping covenants and the puritanical sense of control exerted over trimmed grass, which is never allowed to flower and seed.

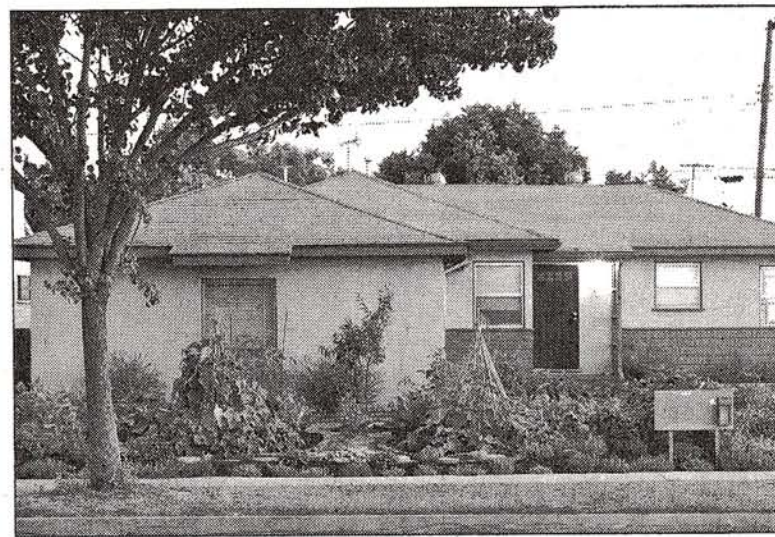
"Lawns are nature purged of sex and death," he writes. "No wonder Americans like them so much."

Haeg's project is an activist gesture, his gardens serving as adver-

tisements for alternative land uses. He put out open calls for homeowners willing to relandscape; the book documents examples in Kansas, California, New Jersey and England, each supplemented with garden plans and notes from the participants.

Michael Foti writes a blog about his family's front yard in Lakewood (Los Angeles County).

"We never really paid much attention to the front of the house



TAIDGH O'NEILL

**AFTER** Foti: "We never really paid much attention to the front of the house when the lawn was there."



FRITZ HAEG

**AFTER** Stan Cox, the homeowner, removed the front lawn and replaced it with an "edible landscape."

when the lawn was there," Foti notes. Like most of the participants, he finds that public cultivation of fruits and vegetables fosters a sense of community: kids coming by to pick strawberries and neighbors volunteering to help out.

An essay by Foti's daughter Cecilia, for her seventh-grade class, is included, and it attests to her passionate belief in the form: "The American lawn needs to be

eradicated from our society, and fast!" She backs up her claim by citing environmental, social and health benefits.

The book is an interesting hybrid of elements. It's part green political tract, part social history, and part how-to guide. There's a resource section, printed on brown paper, that includes a regional planting guide, informational Web sites, an extensive bibliography and testimonials by

makers of their own unofficial edible estates.

While there are plenty of photographs included, the one thing that doesn't quite come across is a convincing garden aesthetic; not all of the front yards seem all that attractive, even if they have designated seating areas to sit and smell the tomatoes.

It's an interesting irony since Haeg's project is very much positioned in the art world; he's included in the current Whitney Biennial in New York (with a project called Animal Estates, in which he installs habitats — a bald eagle nest, for example — for creatures that have lived in Manhattan, on the site of the art museum).

He's one of a number of artists who enact green ideas in their projects: Amy Franceschini's resurrection of San Francisco's World War II-era Victory Gardens ([www.sfvictorygardens.org](http://www.sfvictorygardens.org)); and Oakland's Ted Purves and Susanne Cockrell ([www.amityworks.org](http://www.amityworks.org)), whose projects involve the distribution of neighborhood fruit harvests (particularly lemons), an impulse also enacted in Southern California by Fallen Fruit ([www.fallenfruit.org](http://www.fallenfruit.org)). The ambitious Farmlab ([www.farmlab.org](http://www.farmlab.org)), in downtown Los Angeles, is an umbrella for a wide range of urban farming projects that reclaim various lands for agricultural use.

Haeg is perhaps the best known of these garden conceptualists, though you can take his ideas at face value: His work is ultimately about positive ways of adapting to our current environmental realities — by whatever means necessary.

E-mail Glen Helfand at [home@sfchronicle.com](mailto:home@sfchronicle.com).

## Resources

- ▶ Fritz Haeg's Web site: [www.fritzhaeg.com](http://www.fritzhaeg.com)
- ▶ "Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn" by Fritz Haeg (Metropolis Books; \$24.95 paperback; 128 pages)