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WORLD CHANGING

A USER'S GUIDE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



Landscaping

electricity, with shade trees that decrease the need for AC; and on sundries, with fewer treatment, tool, and nursery purchases. There are many resources available, both from city governments and private organizations, to help us develop relationships with yards that give a little bit back. 5R

■ We may not realize it, but we're in dysfunctional relationships with our lawns. They take and take and never give back. Like big green sponges, our lawns suck up water, fertilizer, pesticides, and money, and if we leave them alone for too long, they start to look sad until we give them some more.

The typical American lawn has almost nothing to do with nature. A dense carpet of overbred alien grasses, usually coated with toxins, it keeps competitor plants (like villainous dandelions) withering before they sprout. Almost nothing "natural" can survive there. The average lawn makes an overgrown abandoned lot look like a rain forest.

Maybe we feel compelled to keep up appearances by tending to our needy lawns, keeping them as vibrant and immaculate as our neighbors'. But we will never get ahead of our lawns' constant needs, and they will exhaust not only us, but also the natural resources they require to stay alive.

There are better ways to relate to the spaces outside our houses. Landscaping our property intelligently can mean long-term savings—savings on water, with self-sufficient, climate-appropriate plants; on



A home before and after its transformation, effected with the help of Edible Estates, Salinas, Kansas.

celebrates puritanical homogeneity and mindless conformity."

The first Edible Estates lawn revival took place in Salina, Kansas, where a family offered up their conventional front yard for transformation (like a reality TV show for lawn makeover), and vowed to maintain the garden as a living, thriving edible installation. Reclaiming front yards through this process not only furnishes families with a hearty supply of nourishing food, it also provides an education in seasonal cycles, organic gardening, and regional biodiversity.

Those of us who think a garden sounds too time intensive are not limited to having an emerald carpet. Even deserts and alpine areas have native grasses, shrubs, and flowers that will thrive on their own with a little water and sunlight. Eliminating the homogenous sod that covers most lawns can be as easy as getting down to the dirt and sprinkling some wild-grass seed. What sprouts will be a beautiful, diverse array of grasses and wildflowers—a little originality in the midst of a green sea of uniformity. 5R

Backyard Biodiversity

■ Garden styles vary almost as much as clothing styles, with trends that change over time. The traditional English rose garden, for example, with pristinely manicured shrubs of identical flowers, contrasts with the complex and strategically chaotic gardens that fill so many beautiful yards today. Besides the aesthetic appeal, a diverse garden that integrates many plant varieties offers a number of ecological benefits. This variety—

called biodiversity—actually fortifies gardens, making them more adaptable, more resistant to pests and disease, and more productive.

A growing, though still small, number of Americans have torn up their lawns and planted native ground cover, shrubs, and trees, which not only need far less water and fertilizer than lawns (and often no poisons at all), but also offer homes for passing songbirds, butterflies, even frogs. Add a backyard compost pile or worm bin for your kitchen scraps, and harvest the rainwater that runs off your roof, and your house can soon be a wild oasis in a sea of carefully clipped lawns and asphalt.

The real payoff, though, comes as those oases multiply, forming a mosaic of habitats dotting the city. Indeed, imagine more and more backyard wildlife sanctuaries, woven into a larger urban fabric of green roofs, street trees, and restored streams and wetlands—an urban landscape where nature is at home.

Tips for a Biodiverse Backyard

There are lots of ways to promote biodiversity in our own backyards. Creating curved and irregular perimeters, instead of planting square plots, allows for gradual transitions between various areas and plant varieties. Planting in tiers—or at least being conscious of the gradation in height and size of the shrubs and trees we choose—also works well in biodiverse gardens by mimicking the natural irregularities of plant habitats. To attract bird and insect life, as well as to nourish the members of our households, we can plant edible crops that reach maturity on a rotating cycle through the year, and fruit trees, which have beautiful blossoming cycles before the fruit ripens. Lawn care can actually be easy: by avoiding invasive species and taking a step back from obsessive maintenance, we can allow naturally occurring plant life to spring up and become part of a pleasant, diverse garden. By planting species that are native to our region, we can integrate our own yards into the larger ecosystem. Plants are better able to take care of themselves in their native habitat, which means we have less work to do.

To attract hummingbirds and butterflies to our backyards, we can plant vibrant colored flowers and masses of plants rather than single