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. 58

Kill Your Lawn

Putting a stop to the destructive cycle of all take and no give is as easy as giving the space around our homes some purpose. Lawns are passé. In some places, it's become trendy to park over lawns, which seems ludicrous for all kinds of reasons (not least of which is that skimming a knee on cement feels a whole lot worse than falling on some nice, forgiving soil). But for all its softness, grass has plenty of drawbacks. If we want to get a little back, the best thing to do is the most obvious: Plant something productive. Create a garden. Fill it with food.

Radical designer Fritz Haeg created Edible Estates as an alternative to the water-guzzling, pesticide-drenched grasslands of American front yards. Edible Estates helps homeowners replace their grassy lawns with productive gardens. Besides the known pesticide-intensive lawn-care issues, the cultural barriers that lawns present are a topic Haeg stresses on Edible Estates' Web site: “The lawn divides and isolates us. It is the buffer of anti-social no-mans-land that we wrap ourselves with, reinforcing the suburban alienation of our sprawling communities. The mono-culture of one plant species covering our neighborhoods from coast to coast 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 makeovers), and vowed to maintain the garden as a living, thriving edible installation. Reclaiming front yards through this process not only finishes 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. 58

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 pristine manicured shrubs of identical contrasts with the complex and ecologically 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...