

## Heartier, edible vegetation is moving in on grass' turf

BY PAUL WENSKE KANSAS CITY STAR

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One of the first things you note about Jim Crist's front lawn is that, well, he doesn't have one.

Instead, his Kansas City, Kan., area home's front yard is a thicket of flowers, ornamental trees, leafy bushes, native grasses and a bramble of green tendrils rising up in suburban anarchy to the orderly lawns around it.

"I don't like mowing, and I don't like spreading and spraying weed killer and grub control, so I turned my front yard into a garden, something I like to do," said Crist, a horticulturist and master gardener.

Americans have long treasured a welltended lawn. But a small if determined movement would replace vistas of unrelentingly green front lawns with at least pockets of exotic flower and vegetable gardens that not only are feasts for the eyes but sources of cheap vegetables, too.

No statistics exist, mainly because the movement so far amounts to little more than a persistent dandelion. But largely because of an art project to turn a front lawn in Salina, Kan., into a so-called Edible Estate, it is gaining widespread publicity through the Internet.

Consumers spend more than \$ 11 billion a year on water, pesticides, fertilizers and gasoline to keep 30 million acres of lawn green and tidy, making grass America's largest irrigated crop. Yet, critics say, consumers get little practical value from this endless regimen.

"Now it is time to question how much lawn we need and what is sustainable," said Diana Balmori, a New York landscape and urban design expert and coauthor of the book *Redesigning the American Lawn: A Search for Environmental Harmony*.

Balmori said that lawns are not natural to America. The concept was imported from England, where lawns thrive in near-constant drizzle. In America, she said, an obsession with grass lawns has produced "an impoverished landscape.... It's a loss of biodiversity that starts with our front lawn."

And while homeowners battle the heat to keep their lawns green, critics raise environmental worries about water and energy consumption, chemically tainted streams, and air pollution from mowers and leaf blowers.

"The perfect lawn is an ecological boondoggle," said Ted Steinberg, an environmental historian at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland and author of the book *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn*.

Steinberg says that consumers are brainwashed to believe they have to flood their lawns with water, fertilizer and weed killer.

"Will it be the end of the world if you get a little clover ?" he asked

The \$ 35 billion lawn-care industry isn't worried yet.

“Consumers get a lot of utility out of their lawns,” said Tom Delaney, director of government affairs for the Professional Land Care Network, an industry trade group.

Delaney said that lawns have many benefits. An average lawn generates enough oxygen for a family of four, and the cooling effect of eight front lawns can equal 70 tons of air conditioning — enough for 16 average houses. Turf traps dust, filters contaminants and reduces runoff.

“A healthy lawn certainly produces curb appeal,” Delaney said. He said a nice lawn adds 20 percent to the price of a home. “And try playing ball over a garden or ground cover.”

Even so, you still can't eat your front lawn, say advocates of the experimental lawn alternative Edible Estates. This latest attempt to bag traditional lawn care did not begin with environmentalists, though. It began with an artistic idea that was planted in Kansas City.

Stacy Switzer, artistic director of Grand Art, a nonprofit downtown art group, was asked by the Salina Art Center to develop ideas for a project titled “Eating: A Community Project Exploring What, How and Why We Eat.”

The challenge “was to look at the need for all of us to examine how deeply we participate in the ecology of where our food comes from,” Switzer said. Out of that search came the proposal by California artist Fritz Haeg to replace a resident's front lawn with a garden. And that was what he did in July 2005.

Stan and Priti Cox of Salina allowed their yard to be used. It was transformed with dwarf peach, plum and apple trees, a grape arbor, blackberry bushes, herbs, sweet potatoes, strawberries and rhubarb, sunflowers, wheat grass, flax and other food plants.

Stan Cox said that at first, his neighbors wondered what the heck was going on, “but when things started growing, they got really interested.” Cox kept the garden, which now nearly obscures his house.

Cox was kind of a natural for the project. He is a plant breeding expert at the Land Institute, which has its headquarters in Salina. Cox became so sold on the idea he began writing about his front-yard garden for the Land Institute and for alternative Internet publications, including AlterNet.org.

“I'm not anti-grass,” Cox said. “My target was mainly what I call the industrial lawn, where it becomes a vicious cycle. You pour on more water and herbicides to make it grow, so then you have to cut it again. It means more gas, water, chemicals and more runoff.”

His writings struck a nerve and were picked up by other Web sites. Cox and Haeg received e-mail from people nationwide who wanted to grow front-yard gardens. In July, Cox, Haeg and the Edible Estates concept were profiled in The New York Times. Haeg expanded his Web site, [www.fritzaeg.com](http://www.fritzaeg.com), to devote space to Edible Estates.