



Lawn and Order

City zoning code is a-changin'

By Anita Clevenger

My father-in-law was born in the Bavarian village of Gochsheim. When I met him, he was a proud suburbanite in Parma Heights, Ohio. The expanse of lawn in his front and back yards symbolized his prosperity. "In Germany," he told me, "we would be farming this land. Here, I can afford to grow nothing but grass."

Across America, everybody's front yard looks just about the same: grass, a few trees and some closely trimmed foundation shrubs. In Sacramento, it's the law. The Sacramento city zoning code currently requires that front yards be covered primarily with "turf or low-growing, ground-covering vegetation."

Is turf truly a sign of prosperity? It certainly consumes a lot of resources. According to information gathered by Sacramento Citizens for Sustainable Landscapes, watering lawns consumes about 60 percent of municipal freshwater in the western United States. Americans put more than 100 million pounds of chemicals on their landscapes each year, much of it devoted to weeding and feeding the grass. Storm-water runoff from turf is one of North America's biggest sources of water pollution. The approximately 90 million mowers, trimmers and blowers that are

used throughout the United States generate 5 percent of the nation's air pollution.

"Sustainability" is a popular buzzword in environmental circles. Simply defined, it's the capability to maintain an acceptable quality of life with minimal



long-term impact on the environment. Sustainability encompasses such notions as growing food within the local region, conserving water and preserving water quality. What we plant in our landscapes directly affects our community's sustainability.

Later this month, the Sacramento City Council will review a change

to the zoning code that better accommodates sustainable landscapes. The proposed language will allow grass, annuals, perennials, ground cover, shrubs and trees in the front setback area (aka front yard). It will allow "design elements," too, such as planters, rocks, mulch or similar material, although living

vegetation must be used as a primary ground cover. Everything must be irrigated and

maintained to prevent overgrowth and blight.

The proposed code puts some limitations on edible landscapes.

When code revisions were first presented to the city's Law and Legislation Committee, several Council members expressed dismay over the notion that people might grow corn or tall tomato plants in their front yard. If you let in veggies, they seemed to feel, there goes the neighborhood. After months of review and revision, a compromise was

reached. The proposed code offers no specific restrictions on growing fruit trees but requires that no more than 30 percent of the front yard be devoted to the growing of other fruits or vegetables. Rather than banning certain types of plants, it limits their height to 4 feet.

Why aren't we encouraging more people to grow food, rather than discouraging them?

To sustainability advocates, this is progress, but not enough. They point to other cities, such as Seattle, Portland, Oregon and San Francisco, that have no specific restrictions on what can be planted in the front yard. Why discriminate against vegetables at all, they ask? While they can look shabby at the end of a season, how is that worse than scruffy lawns of Bermuda grass or lavishly irrigated and chemically enhanced turf?

Home vegetable gardens consume significantly less water than lawns. Freshly picked organic produce is optimally nutritious and requires no transportation system to deliver it to your dinner table. Why aren't we encouraging more people to grow food, rather than discouraging them?

My husband and I visited his Gochsheim relatives, who still live

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in the old family home right in the middle of the village. There was not a blade of grass in sight, but their garden was neat and colorful. To my gardener's eye, the rows of flowers, vegetables and berry bushes, punctuated by carefully pruned fruit trees, looked just as nice as a lawn, and more interesting. More appetizing, too. We sat down to lunch with delicious homemade applesauce, sauerkraut and pickles, all of it grown a few feet from their kitchen door. I left with a jar of pickles and a big bouquet of just-picked zinnias. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so is prosperity. Which family is truly richer, the one with nothing but lawn or the one with a productive, sustainable garden? I'll take the garden any day.

Anita Clevenger is a Sacramento County UC Master Gardener. For answers to gardening questions, call the Master Gardeners at 875-6913. The

zoning code amendment is scheduled for the March 20 Sacramento City Council meeting. Contact your Council member to express your opinion about front yard gardens. ●

San Francisco Flower and Garden Show

The Sacramento Perennial Plant Club will host a bus trip to the San Francisco Flower and Garden Show on Wednesday, March 21. The bus will leave the Shepard Garden & Arts Center in McKinley Park at 6:45 a.m. and leave the garden show at 4 p.m. The \$50 cost includes the bus trip, entrance fee and snacks. Proceeds benefit the club's public garden projects. For information, and to reserve a seat, call 423 1771, or e-mail judy@waegell.org.