

Full Frontal Fruiting

Planting fruit in your front yard replaces energy- and water-wasting grass while providing inexpensive organic food, creating community, and providing a new model of sustainability.

By Monika Carless

Imagine this. A late summer morning, your front yard gently infused with sunlight and the sound of songbirds. You step barefoot down the porch steps, coffee cup in hand, (organic and Fair Trade of course), inhaling the fragrant scent of herbs and ripening apples. You curl your toes into the grass...wait a minute! There is no grass!

Instead, you have fully converted your front yard to fruit, herbs and flowers. Maybe there's even a shitake mushroom log in that dark corner behind the rain barrel: a full frontal fruiting as it were.

Take a hint from Nature and plant a front yard that is diversified and bountiful. Our addiction to grass probably originated from envy of those impossibly green English Manor lawns,

which we can never replicate in other climates without spraying, watering, watering, and then more watering once August rolls around. Undeniably, we have spent many hours and dollars over the last few decades manicuring our small or expansive areas of grass into submission, and then watching blissfully as our toddlers and pets rolled around in the residue left by the landscaping companies. Thankfully, some of the "we" always did know better and educated the rest of us. The first brave souls to convert grass yards to fruit or vegetable landscapes met with considerable resistance (and, still are, in some areas). It was not enough that you let the weeds be, or that you refused to spray and put up little signs to that effect, but then you did the impossible and ripped up said grass and planted flowers!

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If you were to fruit over the grass-scape at your house, which fruit would you most like to grow? One mistake to avoid is the no-plan plan, or the plan that involves fruit you most likely will not enjoy. Take gooseberries, for instance. They are loved by many, but if you have never tried and relished them, then don't put in six bushes because they sound interesting...even the food bank might have a hard time distributing them.

I like the idea of a themed garden, but you could plant fruit, vegetables, and herbs all together. Start with a wish list. What style of garden do you like? Formal, informal, helter skelter? The latter may not be on the neighbors' wish list! So for peaceful relations, consider the view from all sides. Many folks get scared about new-fangled ideas; an over-the-fence conversation

about what you are planning is sound advice. Mainly, neighbors are concerned about your garden project running to waist-high weeds. A few baskets full of fruit offerings go a long way toward fostering neighbors who are friendly to your front yard garden, along with prudent plantings of things that spread to the other side of the fence, like raspberries and other brambles.

Even a small yard can hold a plethora of fruiting choices. A focus tree or two may include apples, pears, or plums, even a nut tree. Consider sun position, shade desired, the full height and spread of the mature tree. In the lower understory and depending on location, fruiting bushes add structure and possibility. Opt for one kind of fruit en masse, for example, if you wish to make jams or juices. One bush of blueberries, currants, or the



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Victories for Victory Gardens

You'd think that growing food on your own property – front yard or back – would be something that would be encouraged. Governments certainly did that during World Wars I and II,

when Victory Gardens were designed to reduce the pressure on the public food supply brought on by the war effort, and to boost civic morale.

But in spite of a burgeoning urban homesteading movement, people are still been hassled by over-zealous bylaw officers, sometimes acting on complaints by neighbors.

This past summer, a Michigan woman was charged with a misdemeanor and threatened with ninety-three days in jail for violating the City of Oak Park's planning code by planting vegetables in raised beds on her front lawn. The charge was dropped after some major international publicity. City officials said they'd look at the law, which says that front yards have to be planted with "suitable, live, plant material." The word "suitable" was interpreted by the powers-that-be as meaning what everyone else had: flowers and grass.

The previous summer, a Toronto family was cited for planting a front yard vegetable garden. Their four children loved it, the neighbors admired it, and the family enjoyed harvesting home grown food from their yard. Unfortunately, the city's Traffic Planning Department did not share their enthusiasm and told the family they had to remove the garden from the edge of their property and plant grass. Although many residents have planted the boulevards between the sidewalk and road with perennials, this garden was apparently thought to be a traffic hazard because it was on a corner lot. Again, international media coverage caused the city to rewrite the law in favor of "soft landscaping" – presumably with appropriate height restrictions.

Wendy Priesnitz, Editor

like will be enough for casual snacking, but not enough for a winter's worth of jam. Moving from ground plantings to containers, strawberries and tomatoes can be nurtured in hanging baskets or movable pots, as can herbs and flowers for added scent and color. Pleasing pathways, cleverly placed benches, decorative fencing, a water feature perhaps, all add up to your own heavenly oasis.

This year we under-planted our apple trees with lavender, chives, and catmint. According to permaculture teachings, apples love to partner with them, and also appreciate a load of composted manure spread under the canopy. We have painted stones with words like "love," "blessing," "eternity" to be placed under the trees. A favorite pastime of mine is sitting at the small bistro table under an apple tree wild with bloom, tea and book in hand. It is almost impossible not to stay in the moment on days like that...or to imagine yourself in Provence.

Don't be surprised if others copy your idea, or knock on your door to ask for suggestions for their own front yard conversions. Should you be lucky enough to have other fruit trees in the area, a block cider-making party or jam session could be a pleasant way to spend a Sunday afternoon. And don't forget that children love to partake in foodie fun, especially if they have had a hand in the growing.

If you are not an experienced fruit grower, ask questions of Master Gardeners or family members with green thumbs, explore the library for helpful books, or link to the Internet. Feed your soil and test for acidity levels to give your fruit the best chance of spray-free survival. Large or small, any yard can become delicious, practical, and beautiful, not to mention an environmentally positive space. If for some reason your front yard cannot be converted (check bylaws, etc. – see sidebar), the same can be done with the back yard. In fact, many cities now allow for a small flock of layer hens, which immediately steps up the self-reliance/sustainability factor of your urban life.

You can also take advantage of opportunities for harvest- or work-share within your neighborhood. Once your edible front yard is established, you might like to be part of a fruit harvest and distribution co-op. Urban fruit co-ops are popping up everywhere, benefitting fruit growers, eaters, and food banks alike. Private gardens may host a heritage plum, pear, or apple tree but the homeowner has no time to harvest or preserve the fruit. And in many neighborhoods, grapes, fruiting bushes, and trees grow in public hedgerows, laneways, and parks. So much of this fruit goes to waste, although one would think that someone would have taken pleasure in the picking. I remember a mulberry tree linking two backyards in my old neighborhood. One neighbor, armed with saw and pruner approached the "messy, nuisance" tree. The other neighbor ran out to explain that those messy things hanging off the tree were edible. "But in this day and age, we can buy everything we need at the store," said neighbor number one. That's how much we have drifted away from growing and harvesting for ourselves.

Solitary fruit grower, or a member of a larger group effort, either way, you will be promoting a new world where locally produced fruit boosts health, economy, and environment.

A wonderful aside of growing your own organic fruit is the opportunity to re-learn and teach lost skills, such as preserving summer for the winter larder. Making preserves is deeply

satisfying. Seed-to-table eating is a spiritual practice; I find the whole process to be meditative in nature. Find an elder or be the elder (even if you are younger) to teach the skill of food preserving in your community. Sourcing jars, labels, and finding fabric for decorative lids is therapeutic shopping; you know this will lead to a creative activity that will feed your body and soul. If you have included herbs and edible flowers in your fruit yard, you can also bottle vinegars and fragrant oils, dry tea blends, serve clever salads with nasturtium garnish, or pop violets into ice cube water for festive drinks.

And always, take time to just be in the healthy space you have created.

Monika Carless lives with her partner Steve on a diversified smallholding in Ontario, Canada, practicing organic, permaculture and bio-dynamic principles. Their experiment in sustainable living, Pan's Garden, is open for workshops and tours by appointment. Monika can be reached through her website at www.wholeearthspirit.com and her blog at www.wholeearthspirit.com/monika_carless.

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Learn More

The Edible Front Yard: The Mow-Less, Grow-More Plan for a Beautiful, Bountiful Garden by Ivette Solar (Timber Press, 2011)

Edible Landscapes by Rosalind Creasy (Sierra Club/Counterpoint, 2010)

Landscaping With Fruit: Strawberry ground covers, blueberry hedges, grape arbors, and 39 other luscious fruits to make your yard an edible paradise by Lee Reich, (Storey Publishing, 2009)

Gaia's Garden, Second Edition: A Guide To Home-Scale Permaculture, 2nd edition by Toby Hemenway (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2009)

Food Not Lawns, How to Turn Your Yard into a Garden and Your Neighborhood into a Community by Heather Coburn Flores (Chelsea Green, 2006)

"A Fruity Harvest" by Wendy Priesnitz, *Natural Life Magazine*, May/June 2007
www.naturallifemagazine.com/0706/fruitharvest.htm

"Tear Up Your Turf" by Wendy Priesnitz, *Natural Life Magazine*, July/August 2008
www.naturallifemagazine.com/0808/tear_up_your_turf.htm
www.notfarfromthetree.org
www.fallenfruit.org

Ten Things to Consider Before Retiring Your Lawn Mower

If you intend to do more than plant a few fruiting bushes in your front yard, it's important to plan carefully. Here are some things to consider:

1. Does your city, community, or home owners' association allow or restrict food growing in the front yard? Can you work within or change those rules?
2. Communicate with your neighbors so that it's not a surprise when you start digging up your lawn.
3. Do you live close to a major highway, a conventional (non-organic farm), a pesticide-spraying neighbor, a factory, or other source of air or water pollution that could contaminate your edible landscape?
4. Check for underground services such as a septic system, or water, gas, phone, or cable lines. This will allow you to situate fruit trees so that you don't disturb the utilities when you dig, and so that their roots don't damage them in the future.
5. Fruit trees will grow more vigorously and bear better if they have adequate space to develop their root systems. Do not plant where roots of trees or large shrubs will compete for water and nutrients.
6. Will your garden receive enough sun and water? Fruit trees, especially, need full sun for optimum production.
7. Consider the effect of large fruit trees or bushes once they're fully grown: Will they shade your house too much, visually overpower a

small lot, etc.?

8. Create a plan before purchasing plants so that your garden is aesthetically pleasing when viewed from your house, the street and your neighbor's house and yard. Avoid conventional rows in favor of sculpted shapes.
9. Consider inter-planting fruits, veggies, with flowers or flowering herbs, at least for the first year. Use companion planting to choose flowers like marigolds and nasturtiums that will be beneficial to your food plants.
10. Choose fruit trees carefully so that you find varieties that aren't just ornamental and that will grow well in your region. Some fruit trees require cross-pollination to set fruit, so if you only have room for one tree, make sure it is "self-fruitful." Fruit trees won't start bearing until at least the third year after they are planted.

Wendy Priesnitz, Editor