

GARDENING

LAWN TO FOOD:

Sustainable, edible landscaping

by Marie Biondolillo

Feeling uninspired by that patch of drying thatch outside your front door? Fear not—with a little time and effort, you can transform your front lawn into a thriving, edible ecosystem.

Until very recently, humans used their yards to grow useful, food-producing plants. “It wasn’t until the last couple of decades that the disconnect between humans and healthy productive landscapes developed,” said Paul Kearsley, an owner/operator of Homestead Habitats LLC, a new sustainable landscaping company based in Bellingham.

Even famously impractical and labor-intensive garden designs of the past, such as English knot gardens, were often composed from useful plants, such as lemon balm, sage, lavender, chives, oregano, and parsley.

“In every culture, there is a history of growing your own food,” said David Zhang, a permaculture education instructor with Bellingham Permaculture, an organization that offers courses on landscape design.

Residents interested in producing food and reducing their reliance on resources

have begun transitioning their yards to install edible features. “It’s a very small step, but it is a smart one,” Kearsley said.

“If we think about our landscapes in terms of inputs and outputs, a lawn is relatively high input; mowing, watering, edging, fertilizing etc. and low output; grass clippings, some entertainment, questionable aesthetic value,” Kearsley said. “With a little imagination and some thoughtful work, we can turn that same piece of land into a very productive ecosystem.”

Edible landscaping can be extremely rewarding. “It empowers people to grow something,” Zhang said. “The first time I grew zucchinis, my friend made them into an omelet for me, and it was one of the best omelets I’d ever tasted.”

For anyone interested in converting lawn space, both Kearsley and Zhang recommend starting small.

“We don’t need to demonize the lawn,” Kearsley said. “They certainly have a role to play in our culture, though like all things, they are best in moderation. It is fine to maintain a small lawn, and they can be quite striking when framed by productive trees, shrubs and ground cover.”

“A great permaculture

method is sheet mulching, especially if you don’t like weeding,” Zhang said. He recommends implementing this method with small plots of lawn, around three by five feet. Begin by loosening the sod, and then covering it with compost. Add a second layer of ink-free cardboard, and a third of straw or wood chips for aesthetic value. Cardboard blocks light, making anything beneath it decompose and mix with the compost. If you do this in the fall, you’ll have a plot ready to plant by spring.

“Simply poke holes through the cardboard, and plant seeds,” Zhang said. “If you continue to mulch, the plants will grow, and you won’t have to worry about weeds.”

This method works perfectly for adding food-producing borders to your lawn. You can also use it for foundation beds, patio borders, garden paths, and even sidewalk plantings.

“A few other simple steps may include planting a fruit tree or berry bush, starting a compost system in the backyard, working a worm bin or harvesting from neighboring fruit trees,” Kearsley said.

Zhang points out that lawn clippings can be repurposed to enhance compost heaps. Most home composts receive a lot of nitrogen-rich kitchen



Seth June of Homestead Habitats works on an edible landscaping project. PHOTOS BY PAVLINA ORTIZ/HOMESTEAD HABITATS

scraps, such as fruits and vegetables. To keep your compost balanced, Zhang recommends supplementing it with dried lawn clippings.

“Grass clippings should be allowed to brown because by then any pesticides that have been sprayed on them should be broken down,” Zhang said. Grass clippings also become carbon-rich when dried, which gives them the power to mitigate the smell of nitrogen-rich compost.

Breaking up your lawn with trees allows you to add productivity to your yard without sacrificing children’s play areas. “If you have your own property, plant a fruit tree,” Zhang said. “Although

it takes care and time, it’s a great investment. One apple tree can feed a whole family.”

Cherry and plum trees also do well in the Pacific Northwest.

When deciding what to plant, it’s important to consider a yard’s conditions. “This is a lifelong relationship and spoiling it on the first date would be a real shame,” Kearsley said.

Sustainable gardening is all about keeping maintenance low. “See how everything around your plot of land affects it – sunlight, slope, pollution,” Zhang said. “I once tried to grow a lot of vegetables that required lots of sunlight, but they didn’t

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do well because trees to the south blocked most of the sunlight from them.”

Many Northwest yards only receive partial sun. Ensure gardening success by planting vegetables that can survive these conditions. “Kale, mustard greens, lettuce, Jerusalem artichokes, and mint do well in partial shade,” Zhang said. “You don’t even need to try to grow mint or kale.”

Vegetables that flourish easily keep novice gardeners feeling encouraged. “Radishes and sugar snap peas give beginning gardeners immediate satisfaction, since they grow really fast,” Kearsley said.

Native plants make few demands on gardeners’ time. “Because they’re native, they’re well-adjusted to our climate and can be easily maintained,” Kearsley said.

Zhang recommends using native berry bushes, such as raspberries, blueberries and currants, to edge yards. Edible evergreens also make for practical lawn ornamentation.

“For borders, salal and evergreen huckleberry offer a triple threat,” Kearsley said. “They’re native evergreens, beautiful in flower and throughout the year, and they produce edible berries.”

Northwest-friendly evergreen herbs like rosemary and thyme can give lawns an aromatic punch.

However, don’t be afraid to experiment. “With the right conditions, you can even grow a lemon tree in Bellingham,” Zhang said.

Marie Biondolillo, of Bellingham, writes about food and pop culture for YouAreWeAre.com. She also blogs about entertainment news for WeekinRewind.com.

Resources & Materials

LANDSCAPE DESIGN

• Active Earth Designs offers landscaping design services focused on enhancing the beauty of their customers’ surroundings without compromising the environment. Serving Whatcom, Skagit, and Island Counties. www.activeearthdesigns.com

• Homestead Habitats LLC is a new landscape design/build company that focuses on edible landscapes and urban/suburban homesteading. They use a pallet of gardens, berry bushes, fruit trees, compost systems, chickens, wildlife habitat and more in order to produce healthy and productive landscapes for conscious citizens. homesteadhabitats.com/

BOOKS

• **Gaia’s Garden: A Guide to Home-Scale Permaculture**; Toby Hemeway; Chelsea Green Publishing; 2001. This book focuses on sustainable gardening in the Pacific Northwest.

• **Introduction to Permaculture**; Bill Mollison; Tagari Publications; 1997. A valuable introduction to permaculture issues.

• **The Maritime Northwest Garden Guide**; Carl Elliott, Seattle Tilth; 2000. Contains a planting calendar for a year-round organic gardening.

• **Food Not Lawns: How to Turn Your Yard into a Garden and Your Neighborhood into a Community**; Heather C. Flores, Chelsea Green Publishing; 2006. Practical advice for ecological landscape design.



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