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Rethinking the Dream

Economic devastation comes with environmental costs—and creative openings.

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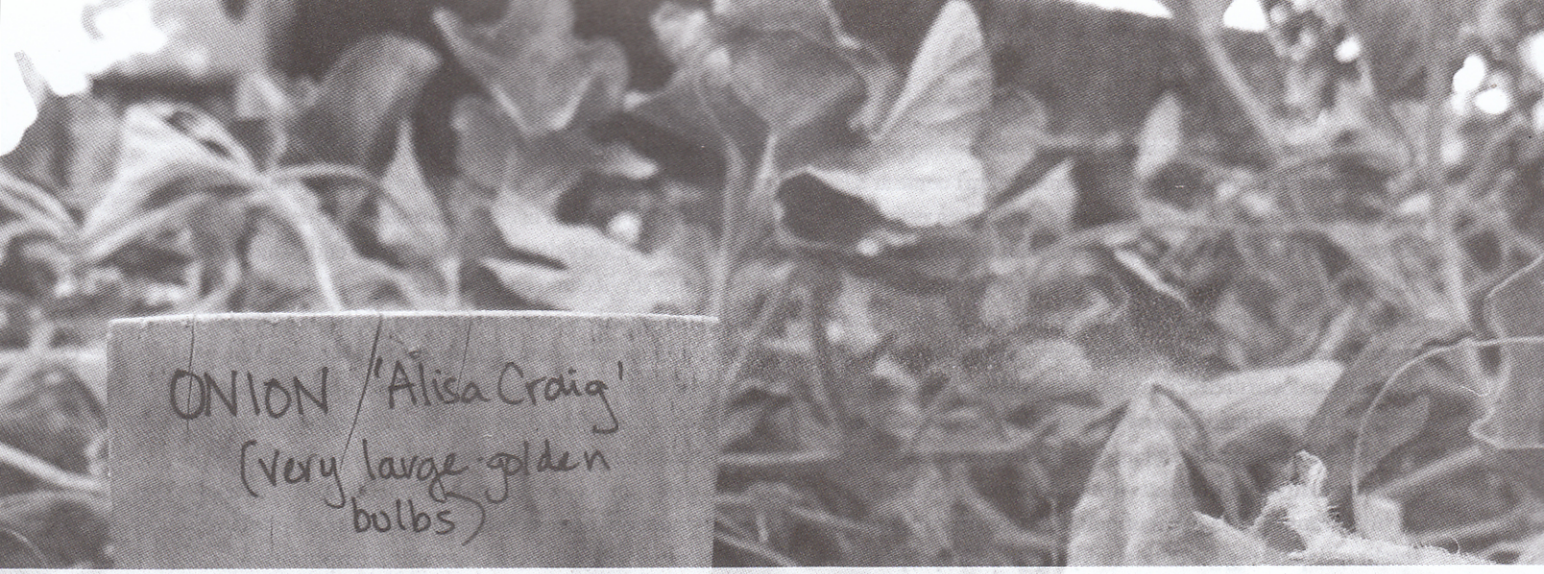

Home Is Where the Food Grows:
As the recession lingers, more people convert lawns to mini-farms

By Catherine Ryan

At first glance, the cream-colored home in Oakland's Lakeshore neighborhood doesn't look much different from any other house on the block. Roses beckon up the front steps, and tidy paths wend through the inviting yard. The air is warm and fragrant in the afternoon fall sun, and a light breeze stirs a familiar yet elusive scent. But the tantalizingly sweet fragrance haunting the air isn't coming from the roses or the lilies; it's wafting up from a garden bed spilling over with miniature heirloom cantaloupe.

This front yard, producing pounds of food each week, is not, after all, just like the others next door. Where a lawn used to be now sprouts food: artichokes blooming like dahlias, red-green tomatoes hiding like treasures among acrid-smelling leaves, and tiny lettuces unfurling in the sun.

Sylvaiette and Den Hill, the home's owners, planted their front yard garden in early 2009 as an eco-friendly alternative to a water- and chemical-guzzling lawn. The garden now uses a drip irrigation system, and the Hills harvest almost all their vegetables from it, only buying eggs and some fruit at the farmers' market. "Before, our lawn served no purpose," explains Sylvaiette Hill, who has shoulder-length graying hair and an easy laugh. "We save on money and water, and we give away the extra food we can't eat."

As the recession drags on, more homeowners of every income level are replacing expensive and water-intensive patches of grass with miniature farms that become at-home produce aisles. In 2009, the number of Americans growing at least some of their own food was expected to jump 19 percent from the previous year to 43 million households, according to the National Gardening Association. And in today's economy where sales seem to go only one direction—down—sales of gardening supplies are up. Seed sales at Burpee Seed Company, one of the nation's largest and oldest home gardening providers, have risen thirty percent this year. Even First Lady Michelle Obama set aside some of the White House's South Lawn to grow food. Like the Victory gardeners of World War II, families are using growing food to demonstrate solidarity against common crises—the specters of peak oil, tainted food scares and, most of all, the malingering economy.

Some families, of course, have long relied on gardening for help managing on a tight budget. Abeni Ramsey, an Oakland single mother of two daughters, had always wanted to serve her family healthy dishes made from quality ingredients. Yet while commuting to school at UC Davis to earn her bachelor's degree in agriculture, she couldn't find enough money to put nourishing food on the table. She filled her pantry with donations from a crisis food bank for a time, but the choices were so nutritionally barren that she applied for state assistance. The monthly $350 in food stamps only bought so many organic fruits and vegetables, and she supplemented with $150 of her own money to buy whatever was on sale—usually two-for-one cereals and breads at Safeway. She had to fill her girls' stomachs but hated serving them

prepackaged junk. "I asked myself, 'What can I do to make sure my kids get fed?'" she says.

Three years ago, Ramsey applied to the nonprofit City Slicker Farms' Backyard Gardening Program, which installs gardens in West Oakland homes and gives low-income individuals the knowledge and resources to grow their own food. In a single Saturday, City Slicker Farms employees ripped out the dead grass behind Ramsey's home and replaced it with raised beds, a compost system, and her favorite crops. Since then, Ramsey has added more beds, installed a rain catchment system to save water for irrigating, and begun raising goats and chickens. This summer she began working for City Slicker Farms as the community market farm coordinator, managing the organization's organic produce stall.

Gardening at home is a lot of work, but Ramsey says it pays off. "Winter gardening isn't as glorious as summer gardening," she says. "It's a pain to feed the chickens and muck out the coop in the rain, and I grow plants that have a longer maturity time, like turnips, onions and potatoes. But it makes economic sense to grow my own."

Ramsey and her girls, ages thirteen and six, now devour meals made mostly of vegetables picked from their yard. They eat canned pickles, tomatoes, and green beans Ramsey puts up. Both of the girls help in the garden, and the only time they get sugary cereal is when they visit their grandparents. "Our diet has improved significantly, and I haven't been to the grocery store in two weeks," Ramsey says. Instead of stocking up on shelf-stable packaged goods and produce that might go bad in a few days, she simply steps outside to pick kale, blueberries, or leeks. "You can't do that on $350 a month in food stamps," she says.

Barbara Finnin, City Slicker Farms' executive director, points out that although California produces roughly thirteen percent of the country's farm commodities, many urban communities here have limited access to healthy food. As long as the neighborhood bodega is the only nearby source of groceries, obesity, diabetes and other health issues so prevalent in poor areas will continue, she maintains. "Fritos, cereal, and maybe a mealy apple aren't exactly life-affirming or enriching foods," Finnin says. "People in low-income communities don't have access to the organic food they want to eat. No one I know says, 'Please give me pesticides,' but they don't have the choice."

City Slicker Farms now installs a new garden every week, and has a waiting list about ten people deep, but Finnin says requests for garden installations have not skyrocketed during the recession. "In West Oakland, people have been dealing with an economic crisis for years," she says says. "It's nothing new."

What is new, though, is an increasing cultural awareness that the perfectly groomed front lawn—long a status symbol for American homeowners—may not be the most productive use of that space, nor all that good for the environment. Sylvaiette Hill, for example, decided to get rid of the grass in her front yard after watching water roll off the lawn and into a storm drain night after night. Dedicating so many resources to an unused patch of grass, especially in drought-weary California, seemed wasteful. "We wanted to do something different," she explains.

Hill grew up with an expansive garden in her family's backyard. Although she treasures the memory of stepping outside to bite into a sun-warmed tomato, the other parts

Photo by Catherine Ryan

Leslie Bennett and Linval Owens of Garden Fare work in the Hills' garden.

of growing food—especially hauling buckets of water—pushed her and her husband to farm out the labor. Last March she hired Garden Fare, a San Francisco-based landscaping and gardening company that specializes in edible gardens, to convert her lawn and do weekly upkeep. The eye-catching sunburst layout of the beds gardener Leslie Bennett installed produces a startling amount of food: at their peak, three tomato plants yielded a whopping twenty pounds of tomatoes a week. "It was tomatoes for breakfast, lunch and dinner!" Hill says with a laugh.

All those tomatoes would have cost the environment plenty had Hill bought them from the grocery store. Growing organically at home eliminates the need for chemical-based fertilizers and pesticides, as well as for energy-intensive hothouse growing methods. The tomato you pick outside the front door makes a significantly shorter trek than the 1,500-mile trip the average veggie takes to market—and there's no need for fossil fuel-burning transportation.

Growing food instead of a lawn has less quantifiable benefits, too. In the fall of 2008, Zachary Norris replaced his front lawn with an edible garden for the usual reasons: "Watering my lawn was a waste of money and bad for the

Photo by Catherine Ryan

environment, and I wanted more access to fresh fruits and vegetables," he says of his decision to grow food in the lot sandwiched between a walkway and his driveway.

He had no idea that his garden would also grow him friends. Norris says that before he began gardening, he didn't really talk to his neighbors, even though he has lived in the same Oakland neighborhood for most of his life. But once his front yard began to sprout greens and edible flowers, passersby stopped to admire his work or offer advice. (Admittedly, he needed it: Norris didn't have much gardening experience, so he ate the immature shoots of red onions until realizing he was sabotaging his onion crop, and he struggled to subdue an enormous dinosaur kale that threatened to overtake the garden.) He found himself engaged in conversations with neighbors as he picked ingredients for dinner, and soon enough, strangers turned into friends. "There are these intangible benefits of offering people food and people stopping by to say hello," Norris says.

Once he got the hang of raising food, Norris found himself with a new problem: The garden yielded much more produce than he and his wife, Saru Jayaraman, could eat. Loath to see such nutritious fare become landfill fodder, he now brings the extra strawberries, chard, and squash to his mother across the street, his neighbors, and his coworkers. Instead of trashing tomatoes that refused to ripen, he passed them to a neighbor who made them into relish. And instead of borrowing food—from his mother or sister, or from a neighbor with a catering business who sometimes gave him leftovers—Norris has a chance to be the generous one. "Now I have more to give back," he says. "I can offer things in return."

Norris' refusal to let such abundance go to waste is the spirit that Amy Franceschini, co-creator of the San Francisco Garden Registry, wants to harness. She and her partners created a Web site, GardenRegistry.org, where San Francisco gardeners post alerts of their surpluses for others to pick up. Franceschini sees the interest in local and urban agriculture as the epitome of relying on others. "It's more than a fad; it's a concern about where our food comes from, and everyone has to be involved in this food crisis," she says.

Devin Slavin has taken that concept of communal sustainability to a most entertaining extreme. Along with a friend, two years ago the 27-year-old permaculture designer started the Grow Food Party Crew, and since then he and a veritable army of volunteers have converted about 25 lawns into gardens in Santa Cruz, Ventura, Ojai, and other nearby cities. Slavin and an average of thirty volunteers gather at an individual's home and spend the day ripping out sod, filling in dirt, and tucking starts into the newly tilled soil—for free.

If a full day of manual labor doesn't sound appealing, keep in mind that Slavin very consciously calls his project a *party* crew. Participants bring a guitar or set of bongos for an impromptu concert, a potluck-style spread is served at lunch and children come to help (or simply play in the dirt). "When we first started, we were like 'Whoa, that was easy and one of the funnest things we've ever done,'" Slavin remembers. "We asked friends to pitch in, and all of a sudden we have gardens all over the place."

News of his group has spread by word of mouth and YouTube videos, and communities as far away as Germany and New Zealand have started their own party crews. Slavin offers his services to everyone, not only low-income or underserved families. "A lot of people face the challenge of opening up their lives to the community and asking for help," Slavin observes. "But once we get past that, we create an opportunity for the community to make a contribution. People really want to pitch in—that's another kind of nourishment."

Slavin thrives on encouraging neighbors to help each other and introducing people who otherwise would never have met. "People who have never gardened come in and experience something they unfortunately don't get in many places, a feeling of belonging to a village, working together peacefully and having fun," he says.

Although growing your own food usually pays off in the long run—all the gardeners interviewed for this story spend less on groceries these days because of their harvests—the start-up costs can be daunting. Soil amendments, planter boxes, starts, and fertilizer add up, and of course, you still have to water.

Yet thrifty urban farmers have found penny-saving shortcuts everywhere. Composting yard waste and table scraps yields nutrient-rich fertilizer in a few months while diverting garbage from the dump. Sprouting seeds yourself, especially ones you save from your plants, can minimize the need to shop at pricey nurseries. Installing rain catchment systems can stop the need of a hose for weeks, and putting in a graywater system can delay it for months. Heather Flores, author of *Food not Lawns: How to Turn Your Yard into a Garden and Your Neighborhood into a Community*, says that by reusing graywater, swapping seeds, and sharing tools, she's brought her gardening tab close to zero. According to City Slicker Farms' annual report, 92 percent of its participants say they save money by gardening.

Of course, growing your own food still requires an investment of time. But even so, many people overestimate the commitment it takes, says Flores. "People should expect to put the same amount of energy into a garden as they do with their current lawn maintenance,"

she estimates. Most of the gardeners interviewed for this story spend fifteen to thirty minutes most days working in their plots and more during intensive periods, such as planting time.

Many gardeners don't look at the hours spent with their crops as a chore but rather as a restorative activity. "It's so satisfying," Ramsey says of her morning work in the garden. "It's nice to have a reason to get up in the morning besides going to work. It's my meditation time: I get connected to the world in a more substantial way."

That bond often extends beyond the confines of a yard to encompass a larger ecology. On a clear fall day, Leslie Bennett, the Garden Fare gardener who designed and tends the Hills' patch, is doing upkeep and gathering the week's harvest. She plucks mature lettuces, pinches off yellowed tomato leaves, and surveys the front yard oasis. "Who cares about a lawn?" she asks. "But if your yard is special and it grows your food, you'll develop a strong feeling for the garden, the land, and, by extension, the environment. It's so close that you realize you can't pollute the ground if you eat from it."

That connection is clear in the Hills' garden. Sharpie-scrawled labels on wooden spoons and spatulas peek out among crawling vines and delicate-looking shoots, identifying each crop. Bennett pauses from her harvesting, wipes her dirty hands on her jeans and points to the weather-worn markers. "They're the perfect metaphor for the cycle that links us all from till to table."

From Grass to Greens

Sustainable landscape designer Joshua Thayer of Berkeley's Native Sun Gardens explains how to lose your lawn.

Assess the soil. Some residential property, especially in formerly industrial neighborhoods, may be polluted with chemicals and lead, which edible plants may absorb and store. Find a company that tests soil at EcologyCenter.org/directory so you don't eat dioxin along with your salad. Some tests will also evaluate pH and mineral levels so you know what the soil lacks and which plants will grow best there. If your yard is contaminated, you'll need to replace the dirt with store-bought soil or build raised beds.

Tear up the lawn. Grass, much like invasive English Ivy, is a hardy colonizer, so you'll have to physically remove it if you want to plant this winter. First, rip out as much sod as you can. Next, dig down a foot and a half to remove the root system, shaking out as much soil as possible. A rototiller may be faster than hand labor, but the machine will leave behind pieces of roots that will regrow grass.

For a less time-intensive process, and if you can wait until spring to plant, cover the grass with non-waxed cardboard and then add a six inch-deep layer of mulch, such as wood chips. After about three months, the grass beneath the cardboard will have died, nutrients from the cover will have trickled down, and you can plant directly into the mulch. (If you buy the mulch from a tree care company, make sure the chips aren't contaminated with diseases that attack local trees, such as eucalyptus and elm, so your soil doesn't become infected, too.)

Amend the dirt. Much of the soil in Northern California is clay-based, so you'll need to add nutrients for a healthy growing medium. Soil enhancers such as manures, compost, and fish emulsions will give the ground the nutrients it needs to yield a bountiful crop. Many municipalities and nonprofits offer free or discounted compost, too.

Plan your garden. You'll want a mix of trees and perennials, such as drought-resistant citrus or pomegranates, annuals (your produce), and pollinator-attracting native plants, such as Mexican Marigolds. Read seed labels or talk with a nursery employee to learn when and how to plant each variety. Think about the layout—for instance, you may want herbs close to the door, since you'll use them often for cooking—and the design of the paths to make tending the area easy.

Plant your garden. Although we tend to think of gardening as a springtime activity, in much of coastal Northern California, winter is an ideal time to start. The soil is less active so your plants will have an easier time settling in. The season is also perfect for planting winter crops such as beans and peas, as they capture nitrogen—an element essential for produce yet scarce in nature—and make it available for the rest of the year's abundance.

Get more information. DIY can only get you so far; if you need help, seek it out from fellow gardeners, Web sites, or books. Thayer recommends *An Introduction to Permaculture* by Bill Mollison and *Sunset* magazine's *Western Garden Book*.

Thayer reminds gardeners that growing your own food is often a process of trial and error. Don't be discouraged by setbacks or daunted by the idea of perfection, he says. And while planning is essential for a successful garden, nothing will grow before you begin. So start digging! —**Catherine Ryan**