

Waking From Our Lawn Coma

By Margie Grace

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Oy vey, the lawn. Mowing, edging, blowing, raking, fertilizing, de-weeding, watering—a green pit of wasted time, money and space. Then we walk right past the darn thing, past the neighbors we don't know, into our house. Crazy, right?

We're under the spell of a collective lawn coma inherited from our ancestors. It's time to wake up, and plant a seed.

Let's play time-lapse Google Earth. Zoom out and gaze upon Isaac Asimov's "crowded spaceship." Europeans crisscross land and sea, conquering, colonizing, relocating in droves, clinging tight to

their belief that formal ornamental gardens and rolling lawns signify social rank, status and wealth. Functional food gardens are stuck out back.

Zoom in on the U.S. Early settlers had to farm the land themselves, obeying the earth's natural contours—the verdant flood plains and richly soiled valleys so ideal for crops. Then bam! America's European diasporas run smack into the Industrial Revolution. Virtually everything becomes mass-produced.

Using efficiencies of scale, developers sought large, flat tracts of land, plowing over offending bumps, streams and arroyos. Engineers drew rectangular grids. Plop a house in the middle, place ornamental plantings around foundation, build driveway to street, cover dirt with a lawn signifying Old World prosperity, and there you have it—modern American neighborhoods, coast to coast.

Ever since, we've been trapped in our self-made residential land use nightmare. We may not be able to un-grid the gridding of America, but we don't have to take it lying down.

It's time to reclaim our land for our greater good. Take that food-producing garden from the back 40 and put it wherever we want. Reunite the ornamental with the edible—roses beside tomatoes, corn anchored by geraniums, azaleas under grapevines. Who says we can't? King George? Or the multibillion dollar agro-industrial complex convincing us those front lawns are essential?

Martha Stewart, God bless her, rescued the home arts from oblivion. But who has time to spend 80 hours building a gilded trellis? Have at it, if that's what floats your boat, but most of us have to work for a living.

I'm one of those working gals. Ten years back, I ditched the lawn and planted an ornamental garden. Then added fruits and veggies. Who knew what would ensue when I planted those proverbial seeds?

These days, I park my car and decompress, wandering along the edge of the driveway futzing with flowers, popping a few snap peas and tomatoes into my mouth, watering my corn-in-a-planter, returning to sanity before I go inside.

Do it your way, I say. My veggies are in pots because, darn it, past age 50 all that bending and stooping is no fun. Maybe you *like* getting on your hands and knees to till the soil—go for it! Maybe you never grew a thing in your life. Here's your chance to try. Plant a seed, see what grows.

I planted my first seed 20 years ago. My boys were in grammar school and we made a tiny "teaching garden." Students ate the produce on the spot. As the boys grew, teaching gardens swept the nation. By high school, an extensive garden program awaited them.

Our neighborhood now has an optional "no lawns" campaign. We've replaced grass with xeric plants, increasingly punctuated with fruit trees, berries, beans, peas, leafy greens, squash, melons and fragrant herbs.

Everybody does it their own way, and everyone wins. George is all about the roses and tomatoes, and couldn't care less about peas. Adelaide is over 80. Her thing is cut flowers—she likes trading for kitchen produce. Bob, a single father, spends each Saturday morning with his two daughters, tending the garden. It's their special daddy-daughter time. And Walter? He loves that lawn, but even he might attempt a hanging herb basket next spring.

You never know how it will unfold. When enough of us planted plum trees, they cross-pollinated and bore fruit. Everything is prettier. Our homes are worth more. We eat better, and have more fun doing it. We know one another's names and stories. We trade produce, flowers, neighborhood news. We keep an eye on one another, in a good way. And we are learning to breathe and play again.

So, I say, there is no right way. Liberate your land, create something new that's right for you. Plant a seed, see what grows.

Margie Grace is lead designer and owner of Grace Design Associates(www.gracedesignassociates.com), based in Santa Barbara, Calif. She is the 2009 winner of the "International Landscape Designer of the Year Award" from the Association of Professional Landscape Designers. She thinks dahlias and string beans look dandy together.



Edibles meet ornamentals in Margie's Santa Barbara front yard, as her son Ryland Grivetti heads out to harvest the noon meal.



Every few weeks, neighbors stop by a designated house and share their bounty. Edibles meet ornamentals in Margie's Santa Barbara front yard, as her son Ryland Grivetti heads out to harvest the noon meal.



Ed Csapo and pup Zia join Lori Robinson in perusing the spread.



Not only are fruit trees beautiful to look at, but a tree ripened peach is truly a thing of beauty. Excess harvest not snapped up by neighbors goes into jams and compotes for the winter season.



Freshly laid eggs are an offering for the community table from Lori. "I'd sooner die than take on chickens," says Margie. "Thank God Lori likes my apricot jam; it keeps me in eggs each week."



Lori takes what she can use, thinking a fresh mozzarella, tomato and basil salad with a little balsamic sounds great for dinner.



A carved stone bowl collects rainwater and serves as a water source for wild birds and neighborhood pets. Jo Salontay helps harvest lunch.



An expanding bamboo trellis "tipi" supports tomatoes. Margie uses a variety of trellises to provide beauty, plant support and more privacy. Surrounding plants include roses, Mexican sage, yarrow and penstemon.



Margie finds large pots superior for her front-of-house garden of flowers, fruits and vegetables.