



Jason Minshew of JBird & Company works the grounds at Habitat Suites, which are covered with edible crops such as these sweet potatoes.

Home Grown

For many Austinites, the line between manicured lawn and edible garden has vanished

BY ROB HODGES

IT'S LATE SUMMER, 7 P.M., and still triple digits. Covered in dirt and sweat, I'm a filthy, aching, frustrated mess. I've awakened to a sore back—the last few weeks. I've accumulated a small mountain of rocks. My yard bag has been stuffed with weeds each week. And only half my front yard is done.

What I naively expected to be a weekend DIY project—replacing my “lawn” (i.e., stubborn weeds and rocks) with a garden of fruits and vegetables—is in its third draining week. I've been set back by unyielding, compacted soil and soaring temperatures. Hand-watering is allowed under the current water restrictions, but that will require a lot of time and effort.

Of course, there is an easier way to accomplish this, but my bullheaded side has so far resisted renting a tiller. I cling to my pickax and pitchfork with an almost moral rigor.

Has my hobby grown out of control? Gardening is one thing, but converting an entire yard to food is an enormous undertaking. How are all the edible landscaping enthusiasts I've been spotting around town finding

the time and energy to pull this off?

I decide to step back and investigate. Austin being the bastion of weird that it is, there have to be some like-minded folks out there converting their yards and dealing with these issues. Perhaps I can get some tips—or at least commiseration.

I start with Jason Minshew, owner of JBird & Company (jbirdlandscape.com), one of a growing number of local businesses dedicated to the trend of edible landscaping. Minshew believes that the edible landscaping movement doesn't need to be limited to those keeping Austin weird. The key to spreading the movement from food and environmental activists to the average homeowner is simple—make it look as good as, or better than, a lawn.

“It's very important to show people you can do it beautifully,” he says. “People have an innate vanity, and front yards are a traditional, conservative status symbol. They maintain curb appeal and property values.” If the only examples of vegetable gardens are the raised boxes within lawns, then they'll always be hidden away in backyards or funky South or East

Help for Home Farmers

AUSTIN PERMACULTURE GUILD teaches permaculture, a sustainable design system (permie.us)

BACKYARD GROCERIES installs and maintains edible landscapes (backyardgroceries.com)

CITIZEN GARDENER teaches gardening through course work and apprenticeship (citizengardener.ning.com)

EDIBLE YARDS consults on sustainable agriculture/gardening (edibleyards.com)

GOFARM social networking site for all things agriculture in Austin (go-farm.com)

NATURAL GARDENER specializes in organic gardening supplies (naturalgardeneraustin.com)

RESOLUTION GARDENS is a subsidiary of non-profit Austin Green Art, which designs, installs and maintains edible landscapes, with a special focus on networking with local food vendors (resolutiongardens.com)

TREEFOLKS encourages tree planting and education in Central Texas (treefolks.org)

URBAN ROOTS teaches kids about sustainable agriculture through hands-on experience (youthlaunch.org/programs/seed)

YARD FARM AUSTIN does start-to-finish edible landscapes for homeowners (yardfarmaustin.com)

Austin front yards, he adds. "If this movement is going to spread to the suburbs, it's going to have to look beautiful."

Minshew practices what he preaches. Just across the street from the concrete hulk of Highland Mall, the landscaping at Habitat Suites is so delectable you could eat it. That's no figure of speech. The grounds are covered with edible plants, creating a lush setting that changes with the seasons. Fig, olive and satsuma trees stand alongside Chinese holly and ornamental pears. Strawberries, sweet potatoes and watermelons rotate seasonally as groundcover. Hedges consist of pineapple-guava or dwarf pomegranate.

Minshew hopes the grounds at Habitat Suites, his signature project, will encourage people to make attractive, productive landscapes at home. His gardens at Habitat Suites are a place where guests can stroll, eat and find inspiration.

I'm one of the inspired. But with a third of my backyard already converted to veggies and plans to do the side yard, I need more than inspiration.

ONE INDIVIDUAL who can commiserate with me is Joy Casnovsky, director of The Happy Kitchen/La Cocina Alegre (sustainablefoodcenter.org), a nonprofit program that teaches cooking classes in an attempt to spread knowledge about making healthy food choices.

Casnovsky got started in October 2008, when she purchased her East Austin home and wanted a vegetable garden. Since her backyard is shaded by trees, the front yard seemed the only logical choice. She converted a quarter of the lawn into a bed for crops and had a plentiful first harvest of kale, leeks, spinach, chard, beets and more. After one successful season, she doubled the size of the bed and planned to continue the expansion. Then came the brutal summer.

Triple-digit temperatures, bugs and water restrictions took their toll, and now Casnovsky is reevaluating. "Winter and summer seasons in Central Texas are completely different beasts," she explains. "This summer made me realize it's not going to be as easy as I thought." She's planted a soil-enriching cover crop and is taking the season off.

Still, as a DIY-er through and through, Casnovsky remains undeterred. "You can

state something about yourself with a front yard," she says. "It advocates what you're doing—like a political sign—instead of having it hidden in back." And her neighbors have taken notice of her front yard crops. Many stop by to ask questions, and some have started their own patches, which are visible from her porch.

"We teach in the cooking classes that a lot of adult learning is about doing rather than reading a book," she says. "That's what I do in the yard. I love getting out there, getting dirty, experimenting and making mistakes."

One lesson learned was about the harsh reality of certain Central Texas soils. While her East Austin plot may have been fertile farmland at some distant point in history, decades of neglect left a hard clay that had to be broken up. Not wanting to truck in a ton of expensive soil, Casnovsky decided to work and amend her soil in sections over the course of a few years, a laborious plan I am all too familiar with.

SOME EDIBLE landscaping enthusiasts have discovered—or, rather, rediscovered—a concept that makes the burden a little less burdensome: sharecropping.

Paige Hill started her nonprofit Urban Patchwork (urbanpatchwork.org) as a community-supported agriculture (CSA) network, in which landowners lease their yards to neighborhood farmers. The landowner and CSA members each get a weekly portion of the harvest, while the farmer enjoys a monthly paycheck. Hill began her CSA as a pilot program in her own front yard in the Crestview neighborhood but has plans to expand it throughout the city.

Hill believes that property taxes make land too expensive to just sit there and be pretty. "I started wondering why we pay so much in taxes for land that only takes and doesn't give back," she explains. "People spend all this money on chemical fertilizers and pesticides to basically make it inert. It makes no sense." She sees neighborhood CSAs as a way for communities to get their land to give back, in the form of food.

Urban Patchwork's approach is to expand into Austin neighborhoods, allowing communities to dictate what works best for them. That communal spirit began on July 4, when a large team of neighbors, family and friends came together in Hill's yard for the groundbreaking ceremony. Using a neighbor's old tiller, they pre-

pared the first of three plots and mixed in turkey-manure compost. Hill is now gearing up for the pilot program's first harvest season (the Crestview CSA begins delivering produce Nov. 7), while keeping an eye out for coordinators to start programs in their own neighborhoods.

She envisions versatile CSAs in which neighbor-members share various duties, whether it's hosting certain crops, live-stock or compost piles. What matters is the network that develops, with neighbors sharing time and duties in order to make the backbreaking work of edible landscaping a lot less daunting.

AND THEN there are the undaunted urban farming superheroes, like Brenton Johnson. In 2005, he converted his entire East Austin backyard into rows of vegetables. He began selling to the farmer's market under the name Johnson's Backyard Garden (johnsonsbaygardengarden.com) and started a CSA with 10 members the following year.

The garden expanded to the front yard, membership snowballed and he and his wife wound up buying a 20-acre tract in East Austin. In 2008, he quit his job of nearly 10 years as an engineer on water issues for the Bureau of Reclamation to begin farming full time. Earlier this year, he acquired another 40 acres near the Bastrop-Travis county line.

Johnson exudes the glow and confidence of someone who is doing exactly what he should be. "I had a full-time job and would do [gardening] in my free time," he says. "It was a hobby that went out of control! Now I do exactly what I like to do. The day goes by really, really fast."

As he went from a 30-by-50-foot plot to 60 acres in a little more than four years, he likely faced the same difficulties with water restrictions, soil and pests that I find so intimidating. But that's not what he talks about when I voice doubt about my own project. Instead, he proclaims, "It's not terribly difficult. If you have a passion and an interest in it, you should do it. Why not?"

Back home in my front yard, that advice resonates. Why not, indeed? I hoist my pickaxe and prepare to break new ground. Then I pause. Would a tiller really be so bad? After all, Hill offered to let me borrow one for free. Without giving it another thought, I pick up the phone and call. ●