

***Food Action Team Invites the Community to Explore Transformation from Lawn to Edible Landscapes.***

***By Judy Rintoul***

To the left the milkweed, blown there by the wind, rooted where the lawn used to be--now feeding the finches. To the right the espaliered pears, artichokes and rhubarb nestle among the peonies and pentstemons. The lawn is banished from the front yard as I'm tending the weeds, the seeds, and the pedigreed plants. I'm making my way through yet another garden transition from monoculture—grass-- to food and flowers. I am not alone. Hosts of other Corvallis neighbors and friends choose to place the cabbage, not the fescue, out front. Where land is precious and rich soil abundant, increasingly folks are eager to lose the lawn and push the pumpkin seeds into the rich Willamette tilth. Collectively we weave and feed the bio-web once the turf is transformed.

Three years ago the Sustainability Coalition Food Action Team convened a group to engage the community in front yard food production and this July will host its third annual tour of gardens where the focus is on edible plants and the people who chose them over lawn. The Garden Group of the Coalition's Food Action Team is an all-volunteer group with a mission to inspire others to transition urban deserts into patches of edible plants. Rose Marie Nichols McGee, a local nursery owner and author, donates her time to the group to help coach people who want to make these transitions. She, along with other experienced gardeners and novices alike, express enthusiasm for working on community building projects. Another group member, Sophie Grow explains that the Coalition hopes to help identify the emotional and financial barriers to growing

food. "We want to show all kinds of people that they can enjoy producing their own food," says Sophie. Corvallis has already removed many of the cultural barriers to front yard food production, something many towns prohibit with zoning restrictions. Now the group hopes to show reluctant city dwellers that peppers and parsley are worth the investment of time, money, and perspiration.

This year, as in past years, the Edible Front Yard Garden Tours will feature gardens that produce food in places where in the past there was lawn. The first tour on July 31<sup>st</sup> from 6:30 to 8:30 pm will start at a community. It will then progress to front yard gardens of local residents eager to share their passion for food production. One of the goals of the Sustainability Coalition's Food Action Team is to increase the amount of locally grown food. This goal allows our community to cut back on foods that are brought to us in a petroleum dependent manner. Likewise, using yard space for bio-diverse flora reduces lawn chemicals and petroleum fueled lawn maintenance.

The action team members talk fast and furiously about the many sources of inspiration behind their current garden ventures. "I saw as a young 20 year--old," says Owen Dell, a professional landscape architect, "that gardening has a powerful community aspect." Owen relates how his house mates were not only ignored, but regarded with suspicion by the retirees in their neighborhood of Santa Barbara, California. "Our youth, long hair, and beards probably didn't help," Dell recalls. "But as soon as we started growing some tomato plants, the retirees would stop by, swap tomato stories and chat with us." Plants bring people together he discovered. Several other members of the action team have witnessed similar responses. Leslie Melnyk, who initiated the edible front yard garden tour project, is a twenty-something herself who

was introduced to front yard food production while at UC Davis as a crop science major and now has realized her dream of farming in an intentional community that produces vegetables and poultry. Anika, a recent high school graduate who volunteers her time to help organize the front yard garden tours, is also working as a paid gardener for a local resident. All the volunteers enjoy bringing people together around their plant passions. The group also includes Kurt Andrews, a local businessman, who with other group members has helped to locate garden hosts willing to put their edible front yards on this year's community garden tour.

The Coalition's work around Corvallis addresses many areas of sustainability. This group's work reminds us that all members of the community, human and otherwise, benefit when a rich assortment of plants thrive. People and pollinators don't eat lawn. Even children, the traditional benefactors of this grassy relic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, flourish when they can experiment with botanical friends. Hosts on the edible front yard garden tours often allow their children to chime in with their own wisdom about plant care. "Children can have a lot of freedom in the garden" Sophie chuckles as she recounts garden antics by her daughter that result in the bean that comes up in one place and some lettuce randomly in another. Autonomy of choice and space is one of the biggest benefits in gardening. Sophie allows her daughter to plant things in places of her own choice. Engaging the senses, the whole person, is another benefit. My memories of my own daughter's childhood include watching her stroke the Artemisia like a cat. We smile at our youngsters, mud on their toes and strawberry juice graffiti on their faces, when they proudly announce that they planted and plucked their own produce. Being able to produce something useful and pleasing is a thrill. Michael

Pollan's pithy Food Rules warns that "it's not food if it arrived through the window of your car." We could say we know without a doubt that it is food when we hear the snap of the vine and grasp the plump pod bursting within. Do we doubt it's a blueberry when we convey the sun-warmed orb from branch to belly? The process of feeding ourselves, and of engaging our whole selves, awakens an ancient emotional response that predates our efforts with foreign fueled lawn machines.

Garden tours in past years have featured folks who even persuaded landlords to let them create gardens and grow food on the property. One gardener grew an entire vegetable garden in containers when the landlord was not so accommodating about changing the landscaping. . The garden hosts on each of the annual tours provide a way to envision the life beyond lawn. One host family even created their garden without the use of a car by bringing tools, supplies and even top soil by bicycle. This year the tour will feature a garden created and maintained by a person with physical handicaps. She'll describe the unique challenges and her own personal triumphs.

For those who have not yet experienced the thrill of wellbeing that ensues from work in the garden, Anika urges: "It is so therapeutic!" I share her description of the gardening experience. When I stand beside the peppers, or on the fragrant thyme, my whole self expands. I'm filled with wellbeing. The world is a hopeful place. I know that someday the lawny land will be reclaimed. Albert Camus, the French novelist and philosopher of the past century, marveled that, "In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me, there lay an invincible summer." Gardening, just like the greater natural world, lets us see that life goes on no matter what. It is bigger than me and yet it has room for me. I can feel longevity in every leaf that tickles my ankles. I feel joy in this

moment and in its inextricable link to billions of moments in the future. There may be dark times, even dead times, in the garden and in life in general, but summer is greater than these. And friendship is greater than these. The Food Action Team has connected two great existential themes: our ability to impact the natural world and the meaning we create by doing it in community.

This year the tour sponsors hope to inspire more people to devote some of their front yards to flora that gives back to the community. Garden hosts are not selected for a prizewinning eggplant or the most beautiful bed of roses. Rather, they too are volunteers who hope to share the passion of their own *process*. They invite folks to stroll with friends from one yard to another, to mourn the fig that died in the frost, to smell the dill that towers above its companions, swap compost recipes, and yes, if one must, make self-effacing comments about one's black thumb or poor weeding skills. These are real gardeners growing real food. Many of us yearn to do so in an aesthetically pleasing manner as well, but it isn't our first priority. Instead, we hope to grow more connected to the land to and to each other. We aim to relax our grasp on the unused turf and allow some of earth's richest soil to blossom.

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