

in the **garden**

DIG IT UP

Times are trying. Our economy has tanked. The world market is precarious. It is quiet outside—like it has not been in years. No bulldozers roaring. No hammers pounding out new subdivisions. (This makes me happy.) But generally I am concerned. There is something going on that actually lifts my spirit and gives me hope. It is slow and quiet. It is bubbling to the surface—locally grown food, farmers' markets, slow food, kitchen gardens...and in particular front yard gardens.

Many of us do not realize how much oil (for transportation and packaging), hormones, chemicals and general bad karma are associated with the meal on our dinner table. It is estimated that an average meal requires approximately 800 gallons of oil to produce and transport and travels 1500 miles to reach our homes. Some of the most fertile soil on our planet has been bulldozed to build new homes and freeways and strip malls. This all makes us dependent on a global economy...which could create peace...or could create wars.

It's time to become very thoughtful about everything we use and eat, its origins and its impact on all of us. So I am very, very excited at the prospect of digging up our front yards and planting vegetable gardens. That's right, all that space in your front yard can be beautiful and edible—released from the cost and water and chemicals of lawns. Historically, lawns belonged to the wealthy and were used to graze livestock. Since we're no longer keeping sheep on the lawn, why not use the space for something more useful?

This is not new. It is, however, being reborn of necessity. It need not be ugly.

My father was a first generation immigrant from Northern Italy, Tuscany, a small village called Medicina. I always wondered why he was so different from my friends' fathers.

In a rather average suburb of Chicago circa 1968, he had flowers and grapevines and figs and fruit trees. My bedroom window was always perfumed with the fragrance of wisteria and bridal wreath. There was a quince tree outside our back door. He grew salad behind the swimming pool. (We were working class, but we had a swimming pool. His friends from his Italian village built it for him.) He would send me out into the lawn to harvest dandelion leaves for the salad. He cooked breakfast outside on his hand-built brick grill with a 1-inch thick iron plate—sautéing potatoes and eggs in olive oil.

We lived paycheck to paycheck. My parents never had more than \$500 in the bank. But their lives were soooooo rich—music (accordion), dancing (fox trot and cha cha), friends, boxing (Dad had golden gloves), gardening, flowers and food. Our yard was alive with friends, family and noise.

Now there are zoning laws against all of this. No gardens in the front yard. No laundry lines. No colored Christmas lights. Certainly no music and no dancing. Gotta keep those property values up so we can flip them and make money. HMMMMM. Perhaps we have been moving in the wrong direction.

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Why aren't our front yards edible?

BY DIANE MEUCCI

How many of us have sauntered beneath a fig tree, or dined under a grape arbor on a hot Roman holiday, or looked out of our hotel room onto a slope of olive trees. What if Italy zoned food out of its neighborhoods?

Why do we love Europe? Because food and music and gardens and people are out on the streets...in the front yards...celebrating life.

It's not so difficult to bring that joy to your own front yard—and to make it so beautiful, the neighborhood association will never notice. It doesn't matter whether you prefer formal gardens, casual landscape or raised beds—you can make your front yard a pleasant place to be and to enjoy life. Add an arbor with grapes and figs planted around it. They both have large, gorgeous foliage, provide shade and have the added benefit of producing delicious fruit in late summer and early fall. Native grapes, Muscadines and Scuppernongs are all pest-free and easy to grow.

Why plant boring shrubs when blueberries come in a range of sizes and produce such a coveted fruit? Rosemary grows effortlessly to enormous sizes here in the Mid South.

Speaking of herbs, they need not be restricted to containers. Thyme will meander under other plants, creating a fragrant groundcover. Marjoram or oregano look elegant filled in between other plants. Italian flat-leaf parsley can be used in almost every meal and is a pretty addition to any garden bed. Dill and fennel add a feathery texture to the landscape.

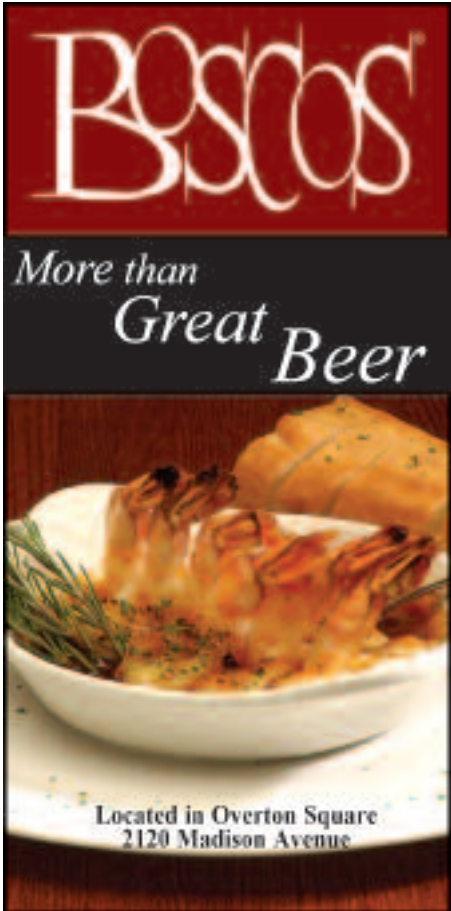
But you probably want some flowers—no reason why those can't be edible as well. Garlic sends up flowers as beautiful as any tulip or daffodil. The blue, pink and white petals of bachelor's button add a faint sweet taste to salads. And borage produces a delicate blue flower that tastes of cucumber. You see ornamental sweet potato plants everywhere in Memphis, so why not grow actual sweet potatoes and get the beauty of the vine AND the sweet potatoes in fall. Perfect for a slope, sweet potatoes will also help break up compacted soil. Melon and squash vines can easily spread out among higher shrubs. No one will even know they are there, until a pretty icebox melon peeks out from under the bushes.

And don't forget your greens—the edible kind. No need to grow ornamentals when swiss chard, kale, mustard, and a wide variety of lettuces produce lacy, vivid, spectacular leaves that can be enjoyed in a planter, then selectively plucked for dinner.

Venture out to your front porch. Spend some time with friends amidst your edible front yard. Pluck some mint from a pot in your front yard for your sweet tea. Better yet, bring the table right to the front yard. Invite your family and neighbors to join you. Eat, drink, laugh and enjoy.

Our "recent unpleasantness" and our financial follies may lead us to what we have been seeking. Perhaps we can recreate the world—one front yard at a time. *eM*

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