





Front-Yard Foodies

Growing food out front is contagious for Northfield neighbors.

Story by Susannah Shmurak
Photos by Tom Roster

Sixteen years ago, three neighbors in Northfield began replacing their front lawns with gardens. Their evolving landscapes have reshaped the way their neighbors think about what's acceptable to grow in a front yard and have borne some unanticipated fruits.

When Kathy Tegtmeier Pak and her family moved to a new housing development in Northfield in 2003, the front yard was covered with struggling sod and a few “gross” shrubs. She discovered that builders had laid the sod on top of construction waste covered with clay excavated when they dug her basement. Kathy disliked lawns for environmental reasons, and she wanted to screen her home and family from the cars that sped through a nearby curve in the road, twice knocking down the family's mailbox.

“It was terrifying to have my kids playing in this yard with people driving through all the time,” she says. She built a rock garden with large shrubs to create a barrier between oncoming cars and her family. Each season she replaced more lawn with herbs, native plants and large stones she obtained from nearby farms. She added raised beds along her driveway and planted strawberries, blueberries, edamame, tomatoes, kale and other greens.

She planted alpine strawberries for neighborhood children to pick throughout the season. “It's a lot of fun,” Kathy says of her adventures in front-yard gardening. “It's just a great big experiment.”

Neighbor-to-Neighbor

Kathy remembers many conversations about plants with her next-door neighbor, Mari Casper, and another young mother across the street, Katie Casson, who also wanted to plant living screens to shield her family from passing cars. Over time, the three replaced their struggling lawns with mixed gardens of native plants and edibles.

Mari wanted a garden filled with flowers and fresh food that she could see from her front window. She didn't want to waste water or have to worry about lawn upkeep, so she dug up her sod, little by little. “It was a lot of hard work,” she says, but perennials require less maintenance in the long run.

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Front-yard gardeners, *left to right, back row*: Stacy Nguyen, Kathy Tegtmeier Pak, Mari Casper, Katie Casson, Rebecca Hillman, Nate Hillman
Middle row: Midori Krieger, Peter Hillman, Sheloah Hillman, Anders Hillman
Front row: Ayana Krieger and Mika Turner.

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Mika Turner harvests edible foxtail millet in her front-yard garden. She uses a home mill to grind the grain. *Left, from top:* Late-season kale, millet ready to process



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She also planted a cherry tree, raspberries, mint and other herbs as well as annual vegetables including tomatoes, cucumbers, tomatillos and hot peppers. She shared the idea of growing food in the front yard with other neighbors, who planted fruit trees and built vegetable beds.

The three recall a constant exchange of ideas and children, who played in each other's yards as their mothers gardened. “These people were really

instrumental in raising my children when they were tiny, and the garden was where we were doing it,” Katie says. Together they made trips to nurseries, dug plants from others' gardens to bring to their own, trucked in compost and shared what they grew in their gardens. “We egged each other on,” Katie recalls.

The trio didn't think of themselves as front-yard garden trailblazers. “I didn't set out to make a front-yard garden,”

says Katie. “I set out to grow things and this is where the sun comes.”

When Stacy Nguyen moved to the neighborhood in 2004, she had fond memories of her grandparents' enormous garden in the country and wanted her kids to experience some of the wonder and joy of growing their own food as well.

For a while, she gardened between her house and a neighbor's. When that neighbor moved, Stacy realized her



Sheloa Hillman harvests some late-season tomatoes in her family's garden. She also enjoys weeding.

front yard was the only place sunny enough for vegetables to grow. Kathy, Mari and Katie gave her a model for her front-yard gardening endeavors, offering what she thinks of as “positive peer pressure.” She added raised beds for annual vegetables and planted perennial berries, herbs and native flowers. She also planted several fruit trees, both in her yard and on some unused city property that adjoins it. The neighbors share the fruit harvest from the city land.

Front-Yard Gardens Multiply

By 2015, when Mika Turner was looking for an empty lot to build on, the vibrant front-yard gardens Kathy, Mari, Katie, Stacy and others had built over the years made her confident that some of her unconventional approaches to landscaping would be welcome on the block. “We won’t be as weird here as we were previously,” she remembers thinking.

Once their home was finished, Mika planted clover to stabilize and nourish the soil. She added perennial shrubs and trees, including hazelnuts, paw paws, serviceberries, currants, goumi, salad burnet and sunchokes, as well as milkweed and cutleaf coneflower, both of which she uses in cooking.

With more time at home during the pandemic, Mika started an annual vegetable patch in the middle of the

front yard where she grows several types of kale, cabbage and salad greens as well as herbs, tomatoes and other annual crops. Now that she’s working more, she plans to replace it with more perennial food plants.

Mika’s sister, Midori Krieger, moved to Northfield from Colorado to be closer to Mika in 2019. She bought a house a few doors down, planning to garden the front yard intensively as well. “We chose this house and this neighborhood because it seemed friendly to this approach,” she says. Midori immediately began smothering her lawn with her broken-down moving boxes and topped it with truckloads of compost, manure and wood chips to create a thriving annual vegetable bed.

She grows tomatoes, garlic, broccoli, carrots, cabbage, beets, potatoes and leeks along with several perennial herbs and fruits, including cherries, plums, rhubarb, black raspberries, chives, horseradish and asparagus. In spring, she cooks maple syrup on a stove she built at the front of the garden. In fall, she plants oats and peas as cover crops and follows Charles Dowding’s no-dig method to preserve soil structure.

The most recent additions to the front-yard garden club are Rebecca and Nathan Hillman, who moved in two years ago. The family had always had

a huge garden and planted one in the backyard their first summer. The shade there made it, “pretty much the worst garden we’ve ever had,” Rebecca says. They wrestled with their assumptions about what front yards should look like. “Is that weird to have a front-yard garden?” Nathan recalls wondering. But encouraged by their neighbors, they decided to till up the front lawn and plant vegetables.

Now their tidy rows of peas, corn, peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, cucumbers, carrots, onions, beans and squash attract compliments from neighbors and passersby. Rebecca admits that it “hurt to cut into perfectly good sod.” But she says, “there’s never been a regret.”

Their three kids each play a part in the garden. Peter, 9, likes helping plant; Sheloa, 7, loves to weed; and Anders, 11, favors harvesting, though all pitch in energetically with every task. “I like that everybody can see it,” Anders says proudly.

Unexpected Benefits

In addition to the plentiful food they grow, the neighbors noted several advantages to their front-yard gardens. They find themselves interacting more frequently, which has allowed them to exchange ideas and share materials. Katie moved to another neighborhood in 2015, and she’s noticed that

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Below: Vegetables and flowers thrive in this yard.

Right: In fall, sunflowers brighten the yards.

Lower right: Dill and other herbs surround garden boxes.



SUSANNAH SHMURAK

since she no longer spends much time gardening in her front yard, she sees neighbors considerably less. She admits missing those everyday meetings. “That level of interaction is not something you can just conjure,” she says.

One season Midori ordered a truckful of compost, which she shared with the group. Kathy has invited

neighborhood children to sample berries, vegetables and herbs. Midori tends the apple trees that Katie planted over a decade ago, and all share in the apple harvest. Surplus produce makes its way to everyone’s kitchens. Last summer, Stacy and Mika pooled their cabbage, onions and carrots to make

kimchi shared among the neighbors.

Nathan and Rebecca toured Mika’s yard last season to learn about many fruits and vegetables they hadn’t encountered before. Mika has taught her neighbors to recognize and use the edible wild plants that pop up in their gardens. Midori built a seed library during the pandemic seed shortage to help share seeds with

the wider community.

“The fact that it’s in the front yard means we talk to each other,” Midori says, “and people in the streets see it and talk to you about it.”

During the pandemic especially, Rebecca found that front-yard gardening allowed for more socializing with

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neighbors and passersby. “All of that stuff more organically happens when you’re not tucked away in your backyard,” she says. “You feel more connected with people because we’re out there more.”

Northfield-based Susannah Shmurak is the author of Everything Elderberry: How to Forage, Cultivate, and Cook with this Amazing Natural Remedy, (Skyhorse, 2020).