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HOME & GARDEN

With help, Bellingham family transforms landscape into an edible garden



PHOTO BY ANDY BRONSON THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Bellingham residents Robin and Karl Frank have turned their grass yard into an edible garden. By using cardboard and wood chips, they are smothering the grass, allowing the fruit trees and berry bushes to grow. With them are their children, Stella and Tommy, standing.

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For Robin and Karl Frank, it turns out grass isn't actually green at all.

The couple and their two young children moved from California in July, and their Iron Street home came with some nice green grass and a lawnmower that they never intended to use.

"Oil prices are going up and grocery prices are going up," Karl says. "For us it doesn't make sense to have a lawnmower and all that wasted space."

So the couple signed up with the Sustainable Bellingham organization to have their yard made into an edible forest garden as part of a workshop by the Olympia organization Terra Commons. All the Franks had to do was buy the plants and hope for volunteers to help transform the yard.

The volunteers came — about 30 of them — along with a pleasant amount of sunshine.

"There were just a ton of people here to learn and here to help," Karl says. "We felt really good about seeing the community."

The Franks' grass is now replaced by garden beds or buried under layers of cardboard and woodchips. Instead of a yard full of the tasteless green stuff, the Franks now have apple trees, hardy kiwis, persimmons, figs, green tea bushes, blueberry bushes and elderberries — to name a few.

"There's a lot. It's really amazing," Karl says. "At some point we were going to do this, just not necessarily this scale right off the bat."

Both parents are science teachers — Karl is a stay-at-home dad while Robin teaches at St. Paul's Academy — and they have a particularly strong interest in the effect of their lifestyles on the environment.

"For us it's all about reducing the amount of carbon that we as a family put in the air," he says. "The idea of these forest gardens is they become a carbon sink. The concept is they take carbon dioxide out of the air, and if more people did that there would be even less carbon dioxide in the air."

And the kids are excited too. Son Tommy is 2 and a little too young to understand what's going on, but daughter Stella is 4 ½ and is in a farming stage and loving the new yard.

"Stella is really excited," he says. "She said, 'When this is all done we won't have to go to the grocery store anymore.' For her to have her yard be sort of a farm, she's excited."

Though the fruit trees won't mature for a few years, the family will happily wait until they can gain a bit of independence from grocery shopping.

"The ideal — and it'll be a few years," Karl says, "is to have lots and lots of stuff come out of this land and share it with neighbors."

Karl hopes that the more he shares the fruits of his labor — pardon the pun — the more people will be willing to give up their lawns for garden beds and fruit trees.

"There's this principle in biology that when a species is under stress it can become a cooperative species so that everyone survives or benefits," Karl says, citing global warming, high gas prices and international strife as just a few of our stresses.

"That's what I was left feeling from (the garden workshop). There's a lot of cooperation, and that's what we need right now."

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