



FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

A Bold Statement Up Front

By Ginny Smith, Quotes Roger Doiron and Rose Hayden-Smith
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Roger Doiron has an idea for the next eater-in-chief: Bring back the victory garden!

He wants the next president to plant an organic vegetable garden on the front lawn of the White House, one that would supply fresh produce to the first family and local food cupboards; set an example of self-sufficiency, healthy eating and sustainability for the whole country; and make a statement about what we grow in front of our homes.

He calls this vision “Eat the View,” and here’s the statement it (he) makes:

“People are starting to rethink what a healthy landscape looks like. It’s not the TruGreen chemical lawn anymore. It’s a landscape that’s more multipurpose, that combines beauty and utility.”

Fans are signing an online petition on Doiron’s Web site (www.eattheview.org) and watching his entertaining video on YouTube - set to “This Land Is Your Land,” sung by Woody Guthrie and Bruce Springsteen, it chronicles his own “white house” front lawn being transformed into an edible landscape.

Doiron, his wife, Jacqueline, and three sons live in a white house, all right, a modest Cape Cod on one-third acre in his hometown of Scarborough, Maine. He calls this place “the belly of the suburban beast,” and this is where he hopes his vision will catch on, one lawn at a time, all over the country.

Don Irby of South Coventry Township, Chester County, dug a 45-by-60-foot organic vegetable garden this year because he wanted better-tasting, less-expensive, safe-to-eat fruits and vegetables. He did it in his front yard not to make a political statement about the environmental drawbacks of lawns, but because “that was good, level ground with good sun.”

Nonetheless, he likes the idea of a victory garden at the White House that the public could see and emulate. “I would love it, the front yard of the White House. We could get back to our roots,” says Irby, who’s in high-tech software sales.

His corn hit eight feet by mid-August. He’s also had success with asparagus, raspberries, beans, eggplant, beets, lettuce, spinach, cucumbers, zucchini and pumpkins.

And while not every neighbor would enjoy veggies out front, he’s had no complaints. Irby has three acres, with 300 feet of frontage, horses next door, and a dairy farm down the street.

Some municipalities and homeowners’ associations legislate to prevent the incursion of front-yard veg-



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etables. Were Irby to grow his mile-high corn in Millbourne, Delaware County, for example, he'd be in trouble. Front-yard vegetable gardens there can't have anything over six feet tall.

"If they have big sunflowers, that's OK," says Borough Manager Dru Staud. "But we've had several cases where we had to tell people to cut vegetable gardens back. Residents were complaining."

Even if no one objects to peppers and sprouts in front of the White House, Doiron says the president should keep it neat: "Aesthetics matter a great deal."

Having a garden at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. isn't a new or radical idea, of course. Several presidents were farmers, and horticulturists and flower gardens have a long history there. And though it hasn't been as fully documented, many first families "probably had vegetable, herb or kitchen gardens," according to historian Rose Hayden-Smith, a doctoral candidate at the University of California, whose dissertation topic is national war-garden programs during World War I.

"Early presidents were responsible for providing for their own households and feeding dignitaries," Hayden-Smith says. "But in general, the history of vegetable gardening at the White House got lost because it's so ordinary."

Wartime gardens were the exception. They got a lot of attention, starting with "liberty gardens" during Woodrow Wilson's administration.

"Most people don't realize that the victory garden program is a World War I program," Hayden-Smith says, mainly because the country's most famous victory gardener was first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who inspired millions to grow their own food during World War II.

"Her victory garden was a visible symbol that the family was pitching in, doing their bit and making a sacrifice," says Hayden-Smith, who grew up in West Chester.

Doiron wants to resurrect that spirit with front-yard gardens, which, in these oil-conscious times, mean less grass to mow and fewer "food miles." Michael Pollan, author of *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, estimates that most of what we eat in this country has traveled about 1,500 miles to get to us.

"Food miles" was an unknown concept when Doiron was growing up; his family had the typical "tomato and cuke garden" out back. His gastronomical awakening came in the 1990s in Brussels, where he was working for the nonprofit environmental group Friends of the Earth.

During the week, Doiron was immersed in the global. On weekends, he was out in the country with his Belgian in-laws, enjoying everything local.

"I was watching my mother-in-law take things from their garden into the kitchen and transform them magically, through the wonder that is Belgian cuisine, into things that were very, very memorable to me," Doiron recalls. "I was realizing that the Europeans were really onto something when it comes to food."



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In 2001, Doiron and his family returned to Maine; two years later, he started Kitchen Gardeners International to promote “the localest food of all, globally.” His virtual community now numbers 7,000 “from Alabama to Azerbaijan,” and his thinking has evolved into “Eat the View.”

Yet while it’s engaging, the idea of an edible lawn isn’t a universal no-brainer. Scott Guiser, an educator with the Penn State Cooperative Extension in Doylestown, outlines a couple of objections:

First, some veggies aren’t pretty, and “to pretend they can be a functional part of a front-yard ornamental landscape is a stretch,” he says.

Two, “bashing lawns as useless and environmentally unsound is a tired old story.”

“I don’t think that trend’s going to take off,” Guiser says.