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Man doesn't need mower for 'bio-intensive' garden

By Jason G. Zencka
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Proponents of the local food movement might want to get to know John Sheffy, who tallies the distance his food travels to get to his dinner plate not in miles, but in paces.

Sheffy, 29, does not live on a farm. Nor does he live next to a local grocery. He lives, in fact, in an ordinary house near the center of town, with a front yard that would hardly be described as enviable, at least in terms of acreage.

Since moving to Maria Drive last year, however, Sheffy has converted his modest front yard into a "bio-intensive" vegetable garden, harvesting food such as broccoli, tomatoes, beets, zucchini, kohlrabi, watermelon, and, on the side of his house, a pile of shitake mushroom logs.

"As soon as I got here, I was thinking, 'What should I do with all this grass? Should I get a lawn mower, or should I invest in something I like a little more?'" said Sheffy, an outreach manager at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point's Global Environmental Management Education Center. "I'm hoping to get about 90 percent of my diet (from the front yard)."

Sheffy first came across the idea of bio-intensive gardening while in the Peace Corps near Togo, in Africa, where the threat of rampant deforestation made it attractive to maximize the productivity of even the smallest agricultural spaces.

"For me, not only is it edible, but there are some very beautiful things here," said Sheffy, walking along the wood chip-covered footpath that winds through his garden.

The small space has forced Sheffy to get creative when tackling typical gardening problems, using sporadically planted marigolds as a type of pest control, Sheffy said.

Sheffy's yard attracts its share of visitors. Occasionally, he spots a deer nibbling his greens, and once he said he found a passerby standing between his vegetable beds, who offered only the cryptic appreciation, "Man, I hate lawns."

Appreciation also comes from the many friends who helped plant the garden, Sheffy said, or from the neighbors who occasionally trade baked goods for fresh vegetables.

"I just like to know how my food is produced," said Sheffy, when asked why he works so hard to create by hand what most are content to pay for at the neighborhood grocery. "And the pleasure of producing it myself."



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John Sheffy has turned his front yard at 1241 Maria Drive into a vegetable garden. *THOMAS KUJAWSKI/STEVENS POINT JOURNAL*

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