

## **Discrimination Against Edible Plants**

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*My View, [The Durham News](#)*

Three years ago, I started a PTA Grounds/Gardening Committee, through which I gardened with students during recess once a week. Although I originally limited it to grades 3-5 and about 2 hours/week, I usually stayed longer to finish a project and clean up while younger kids followed me and begged to help. Eventually, I alternated between all grades, staying 5 hours a day and/or coming two days a week. The kids and I planted and maintained a substantial vegetable garden, butterfly garden, rain-garden, herb garden, and numerous flower plantings in the parking lot's dirt islands.

I felt like the 'crazy' but beloved grandmother-- not because the kids made me feel old (I am 42), but because I accommodated them so and often had trouble maintaining organization and discipline. It was definitely controlled chaos, and the kids loved it.

Between my incessant orders (more aptly described as pleas), the kids learned Darwin's survival of the fittest -- only the toughest plants survived the rough conditions that we did little to mitigate. They learned about life's immense dependence on water and how to collect rain and direct it to plants, whose roots hold the soil in place, to reduce run-off and erosion. They learned about parasites and why we wash hands -- nobody wants pink-eye or pinworms. They observed enormous fire-ant cities and learned about socialism, specialization and how most animals really will avoid you if you are careful to avoid them. And they learned how to share the school grounds with resident killdeer pairs and how, if the pretty blue eggs are taken, the mother will screech frantically for a whole day, a situation best avoided for everyone involved.

I learned a lot too. "Can I take that home?" they would ask. "It's a weed," I would reply. "But it's pretty," they would say. Usually I let them do as they wished -- I was the crazy grandmother, after all. Eventually we transplanted many of the 'pretty weeds' into a 'wildflower' plot.

Though we discovered multiple attractive species, I drew the line at dandelions. They can overtake the most unviable piece of dirt in days. While pulling dandelions, a student lamented that 'we aren't being fair', causing me to contemplate the pervasiveness of discrimination-- even in simple tasks like weeding.

"Here I go again, taking life too seriously," I thought. But 'making mountains out of molehills' is the same thing as 'seeing the world in a grain of sand'. Besides, a more practical example of plant discrimination would soon emerge.

Tired of weed-whacking the jungle that constantly threatened our side-yard, my husband and I converted it to a vegetable garden 3-4 years ago. With my husband travelling for work and me 9-months pregnant, it took a couple months to finish the garden and plant vegetables. Several

neighbors felt that, not only was this too long, but vegetable gardens equal blight, prompting the request for an architectural application. We insisted the garden was in our 'side' yard, thereby adhering to architectural guidelines, but submitted the application and received approval on condition that we maintain the garden during the off-season and plant trees/bushes 'of sufficient height to screen the garden'.

Thanks to poor soil quality and the extensive root system of a Bradford pear tree, we planted (and killed) several trees/bushes before finally getting a few to establish themselves. In the meantime, a number of small vegetable gardens appeared in other neighbors' yards, warming my heart.

This summer, we received notification of a hearing (regarding our garden) before our neighborhood Board of Directors. The hearing was delayed for 2 months, during which the architectural guidelines were amended to require that vegetable gardens be located in 'back' yards and that front yards consist of at least 50% 'lawn'.

At the hearing, I explained that, though they nearly died and, therefore, took a long time to establish, the bushes planted were now thriving and should provide screening within a year. I explained that tall trees/shrubbery require at least 4-feet between them, depending on the species and that, though I could plant the required bushes, I could not control their growth rates, particularly given their proximity to that large Bradford Pear. Nonetheless, a board member made quite clear their expectation that 3-foot-tall evergreens be immediately planted or the garden removed.

Accused of being uncompromising, I retorted that shielding the garden, at all, was a compromise. Michelle Obama planted a vegetable garden on the White House Lawn, for goodness' sake! I wanted people to *see* my garden and plant one of their own. Then I accused the board of 'discriminating against edible plants'. How can society claim to teach our kids 'where their food comes from' while prohibiting them from planting visible vegetable gardens!

Nonetheless, I soon drove to Camellia Forest (Chapel Hill) to purchase their homegrown 'April Snow' Camellia. From the nursery staff, I learned how very many customers reluctantly purchase plants under HOA orders, a good number of which are to hide vegetable gardens.

Staff at 'For Garden's Sake' (Durham), where I purchased the agreed-upon ornamental grasses, confirmed what I'd heard at Camellia Forest and, as a consequence, people's increasing concerns about purchasing homes that are subject to HOAs. Keeping front yards clear of dead cars and debris is one thing, telling owners what they can or cannot plant on their property is another.

Though frustrating, this experience has validated my dandelion brooding over just how deeply discrimination penetrates the human experience and has given me more justification for 'seeing the world in a grain of sand'. More importantly, it's underscored the start of a grass-roots movement for the rights of edible plants, which can only be a move in the right direction.