I get down on my knees. I place a large plastic bowl next to me in the grass, grab a handful of heart-shaped leaves with my left hand, and cut them off about an inch above the ground with the fishing knife my parents gave me for my thirteenth birthday. As with many other childhood things, I’ve taken this knife with me everywhere I’ve lived.

Twenty minutes later, I’m sitting on the edge of one of the hand-me-down plastic chairs on our back deck, sifting and trimming greens: chives and garlic chives, tender young leaves of dandelion and chicory, a stalk of celery’s perennial cousin lovage, a handful of frog’s belly leaves, a few sprigs of lemon balm and spearmint, and the heart-shaped leaves of the common blue violet. Everything I’ve collected is resting in large plastic bowls stacked up in another chair. I let the trimmings and debris fall from my hands into a bowl on the deck floor and toss the good leaves into another bowl sitting on the plastic patio table in front of me.

Our first salad of the calendar year is well on its way.

If somebody were to ask me in April what I think I should eat, I’d probably answer: “All the edible greenery I can scavenge from our own yard!”

When you live this far north, especially if you don’t have a greenhouse, the duration of the annual-vegetable-garden harvest tends to be short. After the killing frosts of autumn, you settle in for the long winter and count in disbelief how many months will have to pass before your next homegrown tomatoes or zucchini will be ready.

Experienced gardeners know that supplementing annuals with perennials and planting cold-hardy vegetables like kale and leeks that can persist into winter are two good ways to extend the duration of
the home-garden harvest. Around here, when it comes to perennials, rhubarb and asparagus rule the day. But Sofi and I only began vegetable gardening after we’d spent years foraging edible wild greens, so not only does our harvest season begin in April, asparagus and rhubarb are little more than punctuation on the wild-green sentences that are scribbled over different sections of our yard.

Many people who live around here love green salads. They also like saving money on food. They’d probably like to avoid some of the risks posed by pesticides and the dangerous strains of *E. coli* that occasionally show up on commercial salad greens. And, many of them would probably like to avoid the toil of conventional vegetable gardening (even though they appear to enjoy working hard on their lawns). So they’d probably benefit from experimenting with different kinds of yards around their houses, and with different kinds of salads in their kitchens.

When I was a child, I adamantly prophesized that, “When I grow up I’m not gonna have a lawn.” My parents assigned mowing the lawn to my brother and me as our primary summer chore, and I detested it even more than dragging the wheelbarrow through snow to load up the downstairs porch with firewood for the wood-stove. We had a riding mower, so it wasn’t physically demanding labor, just time-consuming and boring—though the invention of the walkman and just plain daydreaming about growing up to be a truck driver brought some relief. I didn’t like the sound of lawn-mower engines, I didn’t like the smell of freshly cut grass, and I was afraid of all those stones shooting out like bullets from the side of our old push-mower. I probably should’ve been tested for grass allergies, too.

The second or third day after we moved into our house, Sofia and I began transforming our half-acre lot with its conventional suburban grass monoculture into a cornucopia of plants that would increasingly provide us with safe, delicious, and healthful edible complements to the foods we buy.

We had only rudimentary knowledge and experience with growing plants, and, as newly hired college faculty who were busy trying to prove ourselves, we had limited spare time. So we never made an elaborate master plan the way some landscaping books recommend, but took things a little at a time—trying something out here, taking advantage of an opportunity that presented itself
there—all the while learning from our experiences and from the books we were reading.

The violets in the salad I’m making are the result of having taken advantage of one such opportunity. My parents decided to remove all the violets that were spreading into their flowerbeds and asked if we wanted them. I removed the sod along the side of our garage and transplanted the violets in its place.

My parents also gave us a large bag of wildflower seeds that someone had given them, but that they never used. So I removed a four-foot strip of grass in front of the walk from our driveway to our front door and planted them there.

I stopped mowing most of the grass on the other side of the house, hoping to widen the buffer of shrubs and trees between our house and the house next door. Grubs soon destroyed most of that grass anyway, and then mullein—a typical visitor on poor, bare soil—appeared with its large, fuzzy leaves that make a flavorful herbal tea, now controversial because the plant might contain toxic coumarin and rotenone. (Note to self: Look for actual research regarding the toxicity of the dried leaves. Perhaps the concentration of these toxins is insignificant? Are the toxins even in the leaves?)

I’m relieved to know that Sofia and I aren’t breaking any rules. I called our Town Hall the week we moved in and learned that there don’t seem to be any ill-conceived local regulations regarding lawn care where we live. But I understand that the way we’ve been modifying our lawn still makes us rebels.

We aren’t rebelling against our neighbors, but we are participating in the quiet rebellion against contemporary suburban landscaping norms in the United States, norms that were established in large measure by industries and special interest groups. (If you don’t believe me, read The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession.¹) Troubling evidence has been piling up that such landscaping norms are better for the pocketbooks of those who invest in lawn-chemical companies and support the squandering of fossil fuels than for the health and well-being of the people—not to mention other species—who live, or might someday live, on these lawns.

As far as I can tell, most of our neighborhood follows these norms as if they were a matter of self-evident aesthetic truth, or at least a good financial investment in terms of property values. I know what
It's like to live in a place where rebelliousness is a celebrated aspect of local identity and cultural self-recognition, and this isn't such a place. Prudence therefore dictates that Sofia and I proceed cautiously as we reduce the expanse of grass out front, showing sufficient deference to the current aesthetic sensibilities of our neighbors. I think we're doing okay: the wildflowers are colorful and bright throughout much of the summer; the violets by the garage have filled out into a thick perennial border that doesn't grow too tall; and the mullein growing in the buffer-zone-in-progress, by virtue of some trees out front and the property line's angle to the road, isn't much visible to passersby. (It also doesn't hurt that my parents are friends with several other families in our development.)

I do mow the remaining grass in our front yard, but I use a manual rotary push-mower—the old-fashioned kind. This lets us avoid contributing to unnecessary fossil-fuel and noise pollution that conventional household lawn mowers bring to our neighborhood. Who knows, perhaps when neighbors go by and see me out front with my manual mower they genuinely wonder why I'm not using a gas-powered machine. If my lawn mower can provoke people to ask themselves a question then it's well worth my using it.

It's a couple weeks later and our early-spring raw salads have given way to boiled wild greens—especially dandelion or chicory dressed with olive oil and freshly squeezed lemon juice. Most of our dandelions and chicory grow in the backyard, hidden from neighbors' view by fences and woods.

When we moved into the house, Sofia and I agreed—not knowing for sure if the previous owners had used any industrial herbicides, pesticides, or fertilizers the previous season—that for our own protection we'd abstain from eating anything that grew in the yard until the following year. (We didn't bother asking the previous owners about lawn chemicals, because even if they told us they hadn't used any I wouldn't have risked believing them. Just my own little paranoia.) After years of dreaming that Sofia and I would have our own little patch of earth from which to eat, it was difficult to wait another year before trying anything. We let most of the backyard grow out for a season to see what edibles came up—slender nettles in a couple locations, black raspberries and dewberries along the back fence, a few purslane plants here and there, and, of course,
dandelions. Along the new swimming pool, a large patch of lawn that had been reseeded just before we bought the house tempted us with a bumper crop of lamb’s quarters—a delicious mild green that tastes outstanding when boiled and served with olive oil and freshly squeezed lemon juice. But since we’d read that lamb’s quarters tend to accumulate unusually high quantities of nitrates when growing in artificially fertilized soils, we easily resisted.

While most of the backyard was growing unfettered, we also transplanted various wild edibles that we’d collected by foraging around town. In fact, Sofia and I had actually foraged some of these starter plants before we moved. Such was the case with the wild grape vines, cuttings of which we’d kept on the deck of our apartment in a jar of water in the weeks leading up to our move. We also had a pot of Greek spearmint from my friend Leonidas.

We transplanted many other greens foraged from around town. We found lots of yellow goat’s beard, also known as oyster plant, growing in the unkempt flower beds around the parking lot of what would soon become our local supermarket. We located chicory growing in a big pile of gravel dumped behind the nearby hardware store. We got sheep sorrel from my parents’ backyard. We happened upon colt’s foot on a path along the river, and discovered lady’s smock and wild carrots on the side of a nearby road. We found chickweed and wintercress in a field near the bridge to Hudson Falls.

We transplanted these in various locations throughout the backyard and waited to see what would happen the following year. Some, like the lady’s smock, didn’t come back. Others, like the wild carrots, quickly spread around the area we reserved for them. The goat’s beard, a dandelion relative whose seeds are also carried in the breeze, came back far from where we’d planted it, but only where the habitat was just right—such as along the back edge of the garage where there was crushed stone, sand, and few other competing plants. The chicory came back but didn’t spread much on its own, so the next year I gathered its seeds by hand, scattered them in pots, and then transplanted the seedlings in stony soil along the side fence.

My idea was to increase our chances of getting more wild edibles from the yard with each passing year, while continually decreasing the amount of physical labor it would involve for us to grow and harvest them. Transplanting wild perennials and vigorously self-
seeding annuals was part of the strategy. Another part was letting things grow out so we could see what was already there, and then doing things that might coax them to spread. In addition to the stinging nettles, berries, and purslane, this eventually led to ground cherries near the back fence, common evening primrose in the stones by the house, shepherd’s purse on the path out to the back gate, several patches of wild strawberries, wood sorrel, redroot amaranth, red clover, and a stand of staghorn sumac. We also tried to increase the diversity of minihabitats that our small backyard contained: compost piles, grassy areas, stony paths where I’d removed the sod, places where dry leaves tend to collect, places where pine needles land, and wood piles. Our hope was that more edibles would turn up wherever a minihabitat was favorable to their growth.

I’m washing dandelions, my favorite green vegetable.

I fill up a large light-colored plastic bowl with water and then swish the dandelions around in it. I pull the dandelions out of the water in bunches and set them in a colander that is resting in another bowl to catch the dripping water. (When Sofia and I were graduate students, we were always on the lookout for utensils and other kitchen hardware that would make food preparation more efficient and economical. That’s when we bought from a dollar-store several oversized plastic colanders and many huge plastic bowls—which, turned upside down, also make good covers for pies and cakes.) I repeat the whole process several times until I can see at the bottom of the light colored bowl that little or no more debris is coming off the leaves.

We love the flavor of dandelion greens so much that sometimes we save the water we boil them in, add earthy tea leaves (like lao cha or pu-erh), strain, and refrigerate.

Despite the assertions of far too many people who write about foraging, Sofia and I have yet to notice a correlation between a dandelion’s bitterness and the time of year or its having flowered. For that matter, neither do we agree that dandelion palatability simply be correlated with bitterness, since many of the world’s best-tasting foods and drinks are characteristically bitter—hoppy beer and black coffee come to mind. Sometimes when I’m trimming dandelions, I leave the flowers and flower stalks in with the leaves. Sometimes
I collect just the flowers for a special treat, like white sourdough bread subtly flavored with a cup or two of yellow dandelion petals.

Something else I’ve read: Many of the dandelions that are sold in supermarkets are not dandelions at all—they are a variety of domesticated chicory. Anyone who eats dandelions and chicories regularly will discover a significant difference in how they taste. To the tongue, “dandelion chicory” is no more dandelion than roasted chicory root is coffee.

The more varieties and quantities of wild greens Sofia and I manage to harvest from our yard, the more we enjoy being surprised by a little patch of this here or an unexpected shoot of that there. There’s something exciting and artisanally improvisational about combining wild and cultivated plants. It’s not just about eating weeds from our garden, but about continually readjusting the entire yard plan around whatever plants happen to come up, around encouraging certain things to grow by scattering wild seeds or creating minihabitats, and around the gradual evolution of our other outdoor needs, such as where we locate a compost pile or create a path through the yard.

It feels almost like we and the plants are deciding, in negotiations as it were, how to landscape this lot. As a result, Sofia’s and my motivations for consuming wild greens now include a desire to be surprised, to reckon with the pleasantly unexpected, and to be delighted—and occasionally challenged, too—by the complexity of certain biological and ecological processes.