

# The giving garden

How one Portland family turned its yard into a community chest

BY SHOSHANA BERGER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN CLARK

**JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER** may be a fool's errand, but sometimes you can judge people by the books sitting on their coffee tables. The paperback at arm's reach in Angela Baker's Portland home is *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture*. Angela, husband Casey, and their four children, who range in age from newborn to 8, are indeed "radical homemakers," practicing a brand of self-reliance that one rarely sees within city limits. On an average day, you might find them planting, weaving, knitting, quilting, baking, brewing, pickling, or making papyrus in a lesson on how things were done in ancient Egypt.

You can't swing a cat without hitting a raised bed or chicken coop these days, but the Bakers are different from your garden-variety Michael Pollan acolyte. For one thing, they have limited financial resources—Casey teaches math and social studies at an alternative high school, while Angela (with Casey's help) homeschools their own kids. Through a nonprofit land trust, the family has a 99-year lease on their home's quarter-acre plot in the historic Parkrose neighborhood of northeast Portland. Before

buying the house that sits on the land, the Bakers lived in a two-bedroom apartment. Owning a garden seemed like a distant dream.

But once they got their scrubby plot of land, transforming it into a usable garden required a lot of grunt work. "When we bought the house, the front yard was grass patch over rocky clay," Casey says. "The back was a mess of weeds and a bamboo patch." The Bakers immediately got to work, sheet mulching with cardboard gleaned from a trash bin behind Birch Community Services, Inc. (a local food pantry and support group), compost donated by a large recycling company, and excess wood chips from tree trimmings that they received from the local electric utility. "Free biomass for our garden!" Casey says, smiling.

Angela had been volunteering at a BCSI garden that was about to be sold, so the Bakers offered their yard as the new "teaching garden," where they could produce food and help other working-class families learn how to plant, harvest, and cook healthy food. Last year, after taking what they needed to feed themselves, the Bakers donated the bulk of their organic produce—1,400 pounds worth—to BCSI. >64

**LEFT** Casey and Angela Baker in their yard.

**MIDDLE** Bush bean seeds, planted by volunteers.

**RIGHT** The Bakers' oldest daughter and Cookie, one of the family's hens.







**"The tenets of permaculture are to care for earth, care for people, and share your surplus. We had so much land, it made sense to share it"**

**LEFT** Seed companies often donate seeds.  
**MIDDLE** Old house numbers become bed markers.  
**RIGHT** Suzanne Birch and one of the volunteers at Birch Community Services, Inc.

"This is our first attempt at permaculture," Angela says, referencing a suddenly trendy agricultural method for creating sustainable gardens that feed as many people as possible without depleting the soil. "The three main tenets of permaculture are to care for earth, care for people, and share your surplus. We had so much land, it made sense to share it."

The Bakers joined BCSI when their then 4-year-old daughter Beatrice had to undergo surgery and extensive dental work, leaving them with a heap of unpayable bills. The nonprofit was founded 19 years ago by Barry and Suzanne Birch and charges a small monthly fee (\$50) for access to a 22,000-square-foot warehouse full of donated food, clothing, and household goods, along with classes in financial literacy, computer skills, and cooking. The average member is a family of five that makes \$40,000 per year, a ratio that puts them under the poverty line, according to Suzanne Birch. BCSI families are required to volunteer two hours per month, and many end up in the teaching garden.

"What you find in most food programs are a lot of breads and starchy foods that are cheap to produce and give away," says Suzanne. "We're teaching people to eat the foods that are good for them."

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from February through October, families come to work with the Bakers and learn by experience how to

improve the soil and to plant, fertilize, and harvest vegetables and fruits. Those days coincide with when the warehouse is open, ensuring that its produce is freshly picked.

Judi Bradley is a mother of eight who lives down the street from the Bakers. She volunteers weekly for BCSI, working in the garden with her children, who plant and play alongside the Baker clan. "We can't afford organic food at all. It's just not in the budget," Judi says, joking that a dozen multicolored eggs from Angela's coop barely cover breakfast for her family of 10. "I'm excited for my kids; they'll have these memories and it's a good building block for them."

The Bakers try to grow things that most families will eat—tomatoes, strawberries, beans—but have also started experimenting with more exotic crops. Angela always sends people home with kale seeds, and last year she grew tomatillos and distributed recipes along with the vines. "We didn't know what tomatillos were!" Judi laughs. "But now we make salsa verde and are hooked. We wouldn't have eaten chard or kale, but now we cook with them."

Angela cuts a slice of cottage cheese–buttermilk bread slathered in raspberry-lime jam. "We get lots of buttermilk and cottage cheese at the warehouse, so I have to get creative and find things to make with it," she says. It's the abundance of creativity that makes this family seem so rich. ■