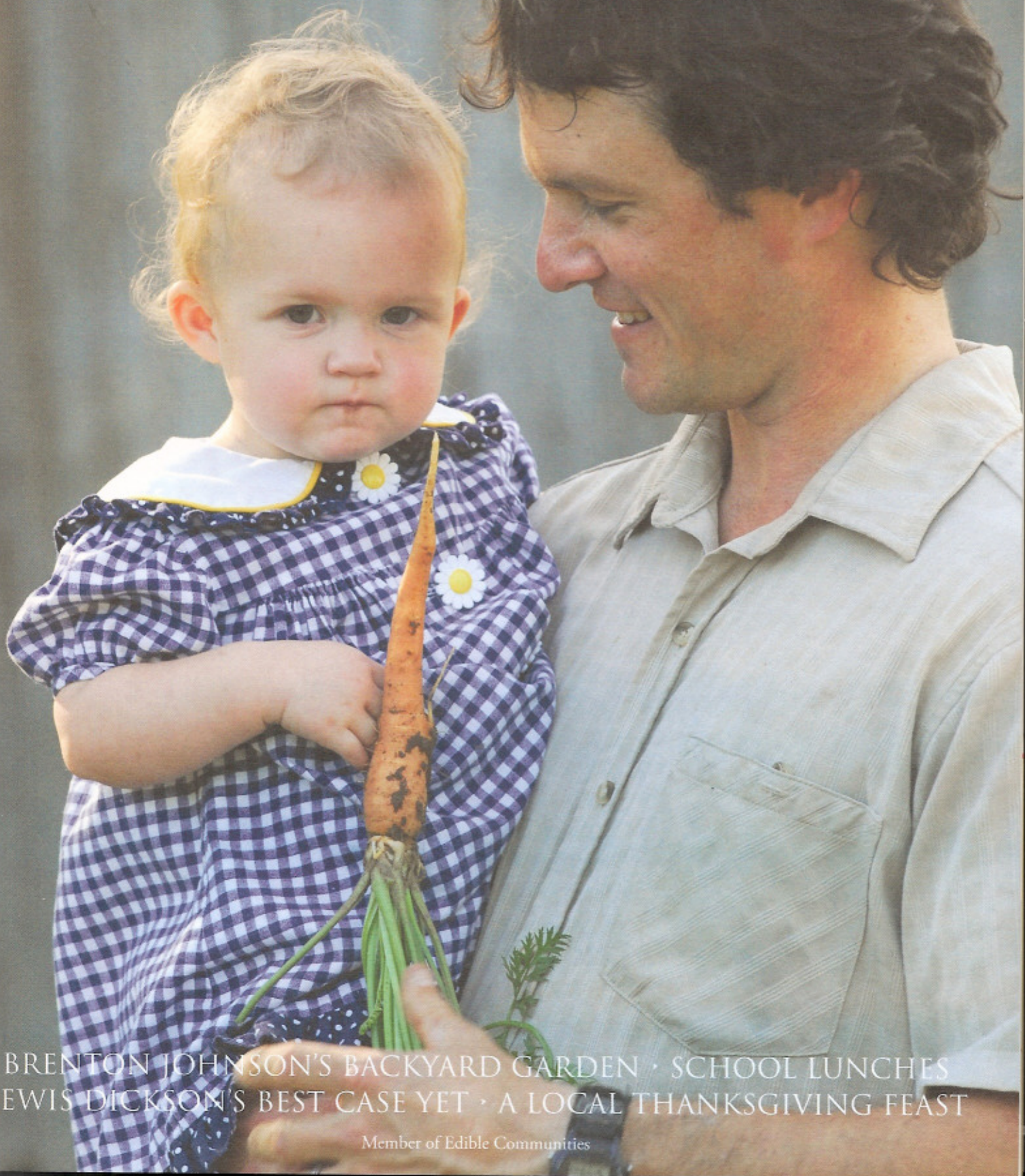


edible AUSTIN

Celebrating local, fresh foods in Austin and the Texas Hill Country, season by season. No. 2 Fall 2007



BRENTON JOHNSON'S BACKYARD GARDEN • SCHOOL LUNCHES
LEWIS DICKSON'S BEST CASE YET • A LOCAL THANKSGIVING FEAST

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Brenton Johnson walking his land with daughter Ada (left) and picking onions with daughter Lila (right). Photography: Carole Topalian



THE GARDEN THAT GREW

BY BETSY LEVY

It's 8:00 a.m. on a summer Saturday and most Austinites are still in bed. But at Johnson's Backyard Garden CSA, sleepy volunteers slam their car doors, grab tools, and fan out into the crop rows to start the day's harvest. The screen door creaks and farmer Brenton Johnson rounds the corner, smiling, coffee mug in hand.

"Hey, Zach," he says. "Hey, Kelly!"

"Hey Brenton—how many boxes today?"

"Ninety." Someone groans in mock despair, but Brenton laughs like a kid on the playground. The farm has more customers than last week—for the fourth week in a row.

It takes a certain kind of person to work full-time as an agricultural engineer and farm 20 acres, until sundown, every night. This kind of person sees each obstacle as an opportunity. Got a vegetable farm but can't hire all the labor to work it? Find a bunch of city folks to volunteer in exchange for vegetables. Want to offer a variety of produce, but too new to farming to grow the fancy stuff? Add another farm's produce to your own and share the income. That's how Brenton Johnson solves problems, and it seems to be working.

Johnson's Backyard Garden CSA grew out of 10 years of dreaming. The 35-year-old and his wife, Beth, grew up in Enterprise, Alabama, and though they went to high school with farm kids, farming didn't run in either of their families. But in the middle of a college thermodynamics course, Brenton was struck by the number of petroleum energy calories industrial agriculture required to produce relatively few food calories. "I decided that all this excess energy use was disrupting nature's natural balance," he recalls. "This was a problem, since I was majoring in mechanical engineering."

He took a few semesters off to follow the Grateful Dead, selling grilled cheese from his van and wondering how to combine his mechanical engineering major and his growing interest in sustainable agriculture. "My parents and grandparents were interested in me finding a stable engineering job," he says. "But I was interested in raising the money to buy some farmland." Back at school, he was encouraged to consider agricultural engineering. The resulting degree led to natural resource management jobs in Oregon, Wyoming and, finally, Austin, where he still works for



the Bureau of Reclamation, and where he married Beth, his high school sweetheart. In Austin, they planted a 3,000 square-foot garden, which became Brenton's tiny urban farm. Soon, his crops engulfed the backyard, spread into the side yards and pressed against the white picket fence out front. One day, Brenton took his surplus produce to the downtown farmers' market, less than a mile from his house.

"I have a picture of Beth, Lila, Drew and me at the market in July 2005," Brenton says. "We're standing behind a card table, and on the table there's this little handful of tomatoes, eggplants, peppers and a bunch of basil. We've got a sign that says Brent and Beth's Backyard and Frontyard Garden. I think we made 80 bucks that day. We didn't have a clue what we were doing. We just asked people to pay what they thought was fair."

After that first farmers' market, Brenton wore out the pages of farming books such as Eliot Coleman's *New Organic Grower*—"it's falling apart now," he says. In January 2006, fired up about what he'd read about the new national interest in local food and community, Brenton started Austin's smallest CSA (community supported agriculture) farm, with 10 shares. By July, he was boxing vegetables for 35 families, supplementing his own produce with some from other farms. Only seven months later, he'd closed on a 20-acre parcel on Hergotz Lane. Beth, Brenton and their three kids, Lila, Drew and Ada, moved in October, and by January, the new farm was producing 30 shares of vegetables. By summer, shares were up to 75. The speed with which he accomplished this earned the respect of the local farming community and beyond.

Brenton has energy to burn and the guy loves work. When it's crunch time, he doesn't get flustered and he doesn't stop smiling—he just moves faster. There he goes, on this hot Saturday morning, sprinting behind the tiller. Here he comes again, rattling on an old Schwinn from the front field to the back field.

It takes 10 to 15 volunteers and two part-time interns to keep up with him. He leads a volunteer work crew three evenings a week. New volunteers are always welcome. Some come out once or twice and are never heard from again, but several volunteers have been working with Brenton nearly every week



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for more than a year. Traditionally, community supported agriculture farms accept volunteer labor as payment for some of their produce shares. In the real world, however, securing reliable volunteer labor is a mystery most CSAs have stopped trying to solve. But it's working for Brenton.

So is his creative approach to filling CSA boxes. He regularly buys special additions for his boxes, from Bikkurim Farms and others—extras like citrus, asparagus, strawberries and peaches. For additional fees, a box can include eggs from Johnson's Backyard Garden or Texas Coffee Traders' fair-trade coffee. There are even three Angus steers fattening themselves on the long, sweet grass under the pecan trees and destined to find their way, much altered, into CSA shares.

When unexpected visitors drop in, Brenton always makes time for them. There's nothing he likes more than sharing his enthusiasm and his plans, and he particularly loves to tell the story of finding the farm—how he pored over geological survey maps to find the best soil, and then trolled the back roads until he stumbled on a 20-acre parcel along the Colorado River, and how the owner was leaning over the fence, eager to sell. The parcel is narrow and deep, its back edge almost out of sight beyond the handsome mature pecan orchard and three fields.

"Can you believe how lucky I was to find this place?" he still asks. "It's sandy loam river bottom. Over there," he says, pointing to a wooded rise south of the main field, "is the old Hergotz homestead. It's the highest point along the river for a long way around. People have been escaping up there when the Colorado River flooded since the late 1800s." He grabs a handful of dirt and squeezes it into a chocolate-cake ball. "This is some of the best farmland left in Austin."

"Did you see the new cooler?" he asks anyone who happens by. "Go in the back field and look at all the tomatoes we put in yesterday! Hey, who wants to drive the tractor? You think I'm crazy, don't you."

Even the developer who drops in occasionally to make an offer is made to feel welcome. But the answer to the purchase pitch is a firm no. In one scant year, Brenton has built a 12-acre irrigation system, installed plumbing and electricity in a cabin for his intern, Tate, tilled and farmed five acres, set up a secondhand walk-in cooler and planned a three-acre fruit orchard. And all without quitting his day job.

It's nearly noon. Eight volunteers form a bucket brigade, hefting 90 boxes filled with fat red tomatoes, fragrant basil bundles, velvet green-and-burgundy okra, and a half dozen other harvest delights, into the flatbed trailer destined for Hyde Park, South Austin and Sunset Valley.

Austin is waiting for its vegetables.

Johnson's Backyard Garden loves volunteers and is accepting new shares. Shareholders can expect the following crops in October: tomatoes, snap and lima beans, cucumbers, eggplant, summer and winter squash, arugula, potatoes, basil, onions, green garlic, lemon grass, okra, beets, baby chard, mustard, kale, hill country apples, eggs and more. To learn more, visit johnsonsbaygardengarden.com.