

Notebook

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Fruit Forward

Christian Douglas Makes
Culinary Gardens The Focal
Point Of His Outdoor Spaces

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FOR SEVERAL YEARS, CHRISTIAN Douglas ran a successful company in his native England, specializing in the design of outdoor spaces. He created gorgeous gardens, won awards, was sought after by the owners of sprawling country estates, and sophisticated London townhouses.

“But there was something missing for me,” said Douglas. “And I didn’t know what it was.”



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So in 2008, Douglas packed a bag and went globe-trotting, covering thousands of miles across Asia, the Middle East, Australia. “I went off in search of whatever that thing was, and began studying different cultures. What I began seeing was how these different cultures connected with their land, and how it came down to food and community. That was the thread that ran through everything.”

The experience served to clarify Douglas’ vision for the next chapter of his life: he wanted to help people create outdoor spaces that weren’t just relaxing and beautiful to look at, but where they could build sustainable food sources - and chose to start doing that in Northern California. “The Bay Area is a hotbed of progressive farming and design,” he said. “I wanted to see if I could create the high level of design that I’d worked with my whole career and bring in the food piece. I wanted to see, for my own curiosity, if that was possible.”



As Douglas has since discovered, it was - but not everyone got it right away. In meeting with homeowners, Douglas discovered that for many people, growing food in their gardens was something of an afterthought. “That has traditionally been how food has been positioned in design,” he said. “Once they’ve designed the pool, and outside kitchen, they think about putting in a fruit tree or a vegetable garden. I wanted to bring that forward, so it becomes an important part of exterior design. People get it more now, increasingly so. They’re coming to us now because they are excited about having access to healthy and nutritious food that they grow right by their house.”

Still, the aesthetics continue to be of paramount importance. Douglas said he wanted to incorporate the results of his training in traditional landscaping into the art of the culinary gardens.

“I miss the charm and elegance, and history and reverence for landscape that the Europeans have,” he said. “And I am surprised that more landscapers here don’t work with food more. It’s so easy to grow food out here.”

Douglas worked on the home of chef and TV personality Tyler Florence and his wife Tolan, who own a multi-acre property in Marin County; the culinary gardens are not tucked away out of sight. Instead, they are close to the parts of the house that get lots of human traffic - the Florences regularly host events and parties.

“We made it an important area of the property and one of its biggest talking points,” said Douglas of the area, in which the family grows salad greens, hot peppers - which go into the sauces Florence makes - tomatoes, cucumbers, beans. There is also a winter garden where root vegetables like turnips, cauliflower, and broccoli are grown, as well as a small orchard. The design aesthetic remains critical; Douglas made sure that the outside area was integrated with the rest of the house and keyed into its architectural style. “It’s crucial that that thread remains,” he said. “We wanted to keep to a storyline.”

Douglas says he wants as many people as possible to grow their own food, and not have the process seen to be something that only the wealthy - or those with ample space - be able to do. To that end, his The Backyard Farm Company social media channels allow farmers and designers to engage with anyone seeking to grow their own food - something that more and more people have been thinking of, especially during the quarantine. “It’s had a huge impact,” he said. “People want to be more self-reliant, instead of depending on the industrial agriculture system. People have realized that we are at the mercy of all these supply lines. But we live in California, which has the most amazing climate for growing food. We are using our water to irrigate lawns and ornamental plants - but what if we were producing food instead?” **CH**