



## How Does Your Garden Grow?

Landscape architect and urban gardening guru Christian Douglas is demystifying the art of planting your own garden — while making Marin more beautiful, one bite at a time.

By Casey Gillespie

**P**ANIC BAKING SEEMED to be the breakout hobby of 2020, but then sprang and our carb obsession quickly gave way to backyard and balcony gardening. On the surface it is a soothing and gratifying hobby, but dig a tiny bit deeper and it's an exercise in self-sustainability. And let's be honest, many of us thought growing some of our own vegetables would be a great way to put off another torturous three-hour supermarket trip.

Historically, times of crisis have always seen a rise in people's interest in gardening. During World War I, food shortages led to households being encouraged by the federal government to plant Victory Gardens. "Food is Ammunition — Don't Waste It," "Sow the Seeds of Victory," and "Grow Vitamins at Your Kitchen Door" were all popular slogans used to encourage Americans to relieve some of the stress put on the food supply chain. The same sort of efforts were encouraged

during the Great Depression, throughout World War II and in the 1970s, when extortionate energy costs and inflation caused the price of food and other necessities to skyrocket. From that perspective, it's not at all surprising that we've seen an uptick in interest — especially in Marin, where we are lucky enough to be able to grow year-round.

And if there was any doubt about the surge in interest in Marin, Dave Stoner, president of Sloat Garden Centers



One of Christian Douglas' Mill Valley creations; landscape architect and farming expert Christian Douglas



forever searching it out, because I think that's where people get paralyzed."

Christian Douglas Design is a full-scale landscape architecture firm that fuses high-end design with urban gardening. A quick tour around Douglas' Instagram feed reveals a visual feast of exquisitely designed outdoor living and growing spaces — and perhaps even a local celebrity face or two. Chef Tyler Florence and Douglas have collaborated not only on the design, but seasonally on the TV personality's elaborate, multitiered backyard kitchen garden.

Douglas is an award-winning landscape designer and touted urban farmer whose work combines his love of design with his passion for sustainable agriculture. Originally from England, he co-owned a design and fine gardening company — garnering multiple awards at the prestigious Chelsea Flower Show — before leaving it all behind and traveling the world learning as much as he could about sustainable and regenerative agriculture, and working and teaching at for-profit and nonprofit farms as well as education centers.

After discovering that many of the people he had worked with globally were from the Bay Area, Douglas realized he had found his people and decided to settle in Marin in 2012. "The Bay Area has both of the things I love most: design and farms. There's a huge design community here, and there's also a huge progressive agricultural scene. And, of course, being European, certainly British, we love the bay ... Marin in particular, the coastline feels very much like the British Isles," he says. "There's a high concentration of people who are into environmental awareness and food, and all the governing bodies are supportive of it as well." Which is why, shortly after moving to California, he set up the Backyard Farm Co., a sister company to his design firm aimed at teaching people about edible landscaping, while helping to foster the

confirms it: "With so much of the population staying home, growing your own food has become the focus in many gardens and with many families. Children and adults are being exposed to the joys of gardening for the first time and have discovered the healing and rewarding aspect of working the soil and reaping the harvest," he says.

Unless you have experience growing, trying to figure out what to plant, where to plant it and why it isn't thriving can be rather daunting. "Google has a tendency

to overwhelm us with contradicting information," says Christian Douglas, owner of the Marin-based landscape architecture company Christian Douglas Design ([christian-douglas.com](http://christian-douglas.com)) and The Backyard Farm Co. ([thebackyardfarm.com](http://thebackyardfarm.com)). "Small-scale intensive farming is nuanced and there are lots of tips and tricks," he says. "We're trying to figure out ways of supporting people remotely so that you can just come to us and get that information without spending




An edible raised garden is both beautiful and functional.

connection of growing your own food to sustainability.

"Growing food locally, even if it's just a percentage of what we eat on a weekly basis, takes the load off huge organic farms and their impact on the environment, and that matters because food security is going to become more and more important," he says. "As a designer, I took on the responsibility of what we should be starting now, designing more and more food into our residential landscapes and neighborhoods." Luckily, in Marin we can grow 12 months out of the year and even planting a small seasonal garden can help lessen some of the pressure on the industrial food supply chain. But where Douglas really plans on making a difference is in getting kids involved.

Whether it is working with families one on one or with schools on growing projects, he believes that instilling a sense of connection with the earth and learning how to be more self-sufficient is the gift that will keep on giving for generations to come. "We have a team of farmers who have worked professionally on organic farms and who bring those skills and that knowledge to support people and empower them to become better farmers, and then teach their children. The idea is that we teach them, our next generation of leaders, so that they have gardening in their blood. We want to create more of that in our community now so that we can pass it on to the next generation," he says.

Even though it was the act of growing food that first allowed early humans to stop chasing game and start settlements, and it is certainly part of the human experience, but that doesn't mean it's going to come naturally to all of us. "Gardening has its highs and lows. It's not always consistent. You're working with the natural world and there are ebbs and flows, which is why I think people can lose interest," says Douglas. "That's why we set up the Backyard Farm Co. — to provide a resource for people and a place to feel supported and to learn quickly. We teach people the little hacks so that they can succeed and therefore feel more motivated to continue on."

If you (and the kids) haven't started planning your fall garden yet, he adds, now it is the time. "It depends on where you are in Marin or the Bay Area, but probably around late August, you're going to be getting everything ready, switching out your summer vegetables. For fall, we're getting more into our brassicas: Brussels sprouts, cabbages, cauliflower, sweet peas, sugar snap peas, leafy greens and root vegetables. Think about ingredients you would use to make soups." And if you need help making that garden grow? You know who to turn to. 

## Christian Douglas' Local Supplier Hit List

### **Baker Creek Heirloom Seed**

also sold at Petaluma Seed Bank  
 (110 Petaluma Blvd, N. Petaluma)  
[rareseeds.com](http://rareseeds.com)

### **Cottage Gardens of Petaluma**

3995 Emerald Drive, Petaluma  
[cottagegardensofpet.com](http://cottagegardensofpet.com)

### **Fairfax Lumber & Hardware**

109 Broadway, Fairfax,  
[fairfaxlumber.com](http://fairfaxlumber.com)

### **Green Jeans Nursery**

690 Redwood Highway, Mill Valley  
[greenjeansgadensupply.com](http://greenjeansgadensupply.com)

### **The Living Seed Company**

10970 Shoreline Highway,  
 Point Reyes Station  
[livingseedcompany.com](http://livingseedcompany.com)

### **Sloat Nursery Kentfield**

700 Sir Francis Drake Blvd,  
 Kentfield,  
[sloatgardens.com](http://sloatgardens.com)

### **West End Nursery**

1938 Fifth Ave, San Rafael  
[westendnursery.com](http://westendnursery.com)