

THE TALE OF TWO GARDENS

Two gardeners on separate coasts find their love of growing

vegetables connects them with family, community, and the earth.

Photography by Ed Gohlich and Langdon Clay



California

On a warm summer's day, Mary Culver unloads a basket of rainbow-colored tomatoes at the local bakery in Rancho Santa Fe, California. The splendid crop of heirlooms isn't for sale; instead, customers in search of a pastry are free to grab one, or two, or ten of the luscious summer fruits—as many as they might like. It's just one of the ways Mary shares the bounty and joy she finds from tending her growing crop of vegetables.

A BEGINNING

Mary wasn't always a vegetable gardener—or even a gardener, for that matter. She drew her first inspiration from her husband, Bill. To combat the adobe clay soil behind their California home, he built raised beds and topped them off with a healthy mix of soil. But before she could fill those beds with flowers, the vegetable gardening bug bit Mary.

Today, 20 years later, she starts flat after flat of her own seeds and fills an acre and a half with all sorts of vegetables and herbs. Her tomato garden alone has nearly 210 varieties of heirlooms. “My dream is to be a farmer,” Mary says.

THE JOY OF VEGETABLES

Once Mary began to harvest her yearly crops, she found herself with more vegetables than she could use. So she began delivering overflowing



Bill Culver, an engineer, constructed the raised beds; they allow the Culvers to better control their growing conditions.

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Mary grows more than she can use and gives all of her extras away.

Wide paths between the raised beds allow plenty of room for walking and pushing a wheelbarrow.

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baskets to neighbors and friends, never accepting payment—just a thanks—always happy instead that others could share in the joy she found in growing vegetables. “I knew other people liked what I was doing,” Mary says. “And I couldn’t use all that we grew.”

Mary continues to grow more than she and Bill can use, and still gives nearly all of her extras away. Friends and family welcome those weekly baskets filled with peppers, tomatoes, leeks, and herbs. She and Bill plant a pumpkin patch each year, just so they can pass out pumpkins in the fall to neighborhood youngsters. And when her 8-year-old granddaughter helps harvest peas, Mary watches the excitement in her face as she makes the connection between food on her table and the plants growing in the yard. “I love sharing the joy of my garden,” Mary says.

CONTINUING CONNECTIONS

Sharing that joy renews Mary, no matter how hot the summers or how many hours she ends up toiling, weeding, and watering. Growing vegetables, in fact, proves less intimidating to Mary than

A sign marks the Culver garden, above. As Mary’s garden continues to grow, she contemplates selling some of her crop. All of her vegetables grow in raised beds for drainage and better soil, right.

tending to flowers. “Vegetable gardening is easier than doing flowers,” she says. “With flowers, you have to find just the right spot for sun and soil. With vegetable gardening in raised beds you know exactly what will grow.”

When the season quiets down for the winter, Mary carefully pages through magazines and catalogs for rediscovered heirlooms. Once March sun warms the soil, she tends her seeds, growing what she knows will succeed and what she loves. Those crops ensure she’ll continue to parcel out the fruits of her labors, no payment expected or required. “Vegetable gardening is such a unique way of connecting and sharing,” Mary says.



Five vegetables to plant

The vegetables Mary couldn’t live without?

Any and all greens: With multiple colors, greens are a beautiful addition to the garden, Mary says. They taste delightful, come up fast, and are easy to harvest.

Potatoes: “Everyone should grow potatoes,” Mary says. It’s fun to dig through the dirt and come up with a crop of all sizes and shapes.

Garlic and onions: Both these crops add visual height to the garden, stay in the ground for a long time, and provide varying harvest times. Garlic and onions are great for all sorts of cooking, too, and allow you to pick just what you need.

Tomatoes: Mary has a rainbow of color in her tomato garden, from yellow to black, pink, orange, and red. “Heirlooms taste so much better than the hybrids and are just as easy to grow,” she says.

Leeks: Leeks are similar to onions—tall and regal—and come in handy when making soups.

Tips for your vegetables

Here are Mary’s tips, gleaned from 20 years of cultivating a garden.

Amend the soil. Good soil is important; that’s why raised beds are so nice, Mary says.

Water properly. If you can afford it, a watering system helps. “That way you are forever not forgetting to water,” Mary says.

Choose well. Plant things you know you’re going to like to eat.

Plant in the right spot. Check that the light is adequate for whatever you are planting.

Experiment. Don’t be afraid to try new things.

Pennsylvania

Jon Carloftis lugs a bag heavy with vegetables down the rolling green hills to his Bucks County, Pennsylvania, home. It is early summer, and his neighbors have just finished a harvest from their small vegetable plot. The garden, lush with early green beans and chard, provides more than enough, and so he makes a regular trip across the pastures to share in its bounty. Jon, a garden designer, created the quaint space for his friends, and its harvest is a welcome—and tasty—reminder of the joys and community that flourish when you plant a vegetable garden.

THE LITTLE GARDEN THAT COULD

Jon designed the Pennsylvania garden using four 30-year-old arborvitae as corners to a square; as a border he installed a handmade cedar fence, its top undulating in waves and flowers softening the edges of the rustic barrier. Two paths, made of indigenous stepping-stones, bisect the square; the cross that the paths create is a familiar element from early American gardens and a space-saving, practical piece that Jon incorporates in all his vegetable gardens. “In a vegetable garden, I include permanent paths. If it’s a rainy day, you can still get in there and work,” he says.

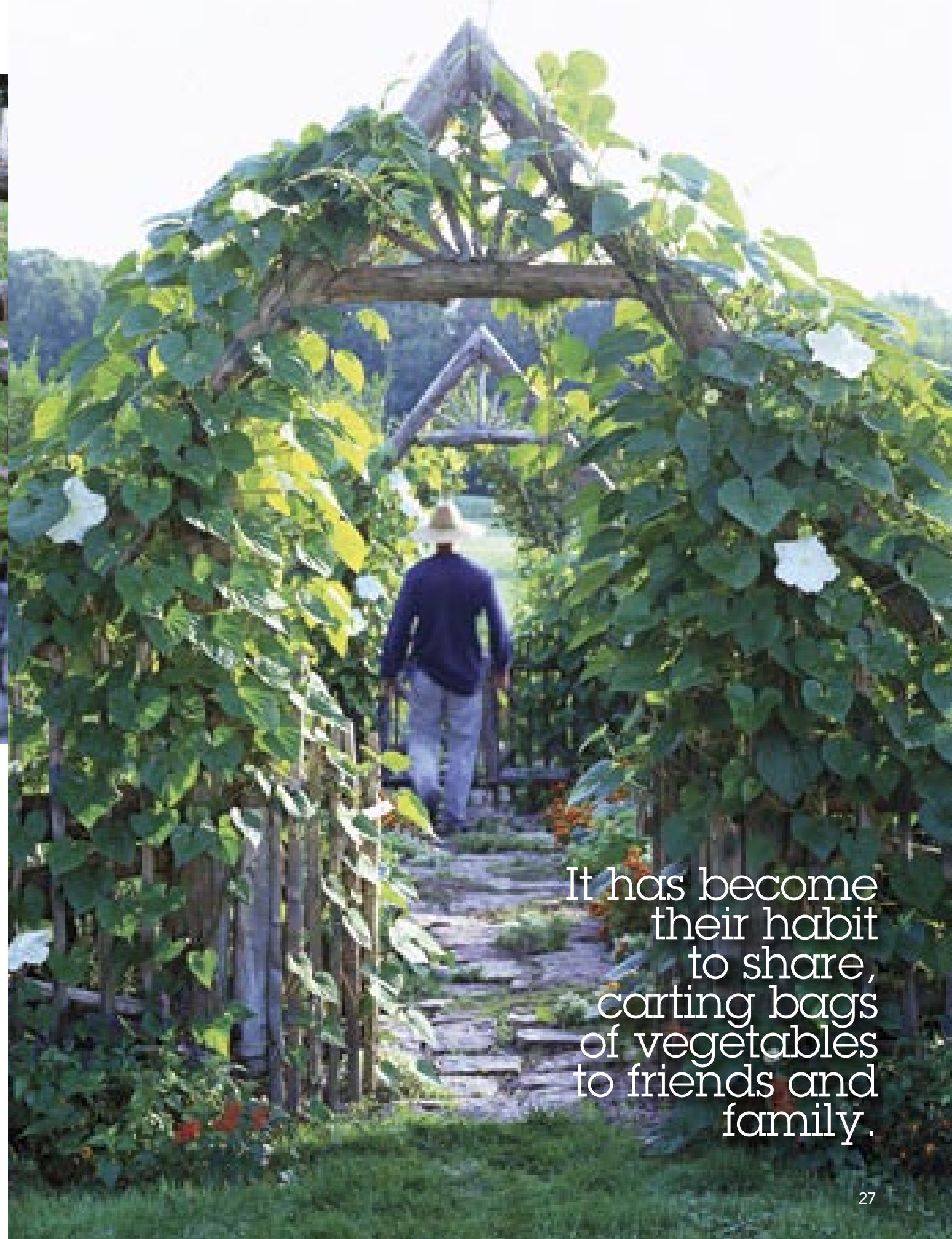
Moonflowers climb a fence and arbor. Carloftis always includes a flower border outside his vegetable gardens.

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Leafy greens add structure to the vegetable garden, above. Nasturtiums and woolly thyme fill the gaps between stepping-stones, right. Both are easy fillers that add color and foliage to a vegetable plot. Arbors mark an entry to the garden, opposite.

Woolly thyme thrives between the stones, and nasturtiums and moonflowers add blooms. Teepees and arbors provide vertical height and support to a series of hardworking plants. The vegetables thrive in their close quarters, adding beauty to the bucolic landscape and offering a harvest that, like many gardens, provides more than Jon's friends can use. And that's where the tradition of sharing began—the couple giving its extras to neighbors and friends down Pennsylvania country roads. "It's a simple garden, but more and more people want this [in their gardens]—something that is visually appealing and functional," Jon says.



It has become their habit to share, carting bags of vegetables to friends and family.

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Chard is one of Jon's favorite vegetables for interest and color. He picks vegetables as much for their visual interest as for their harvest potential. Jon Carloftis, *opposite*, in Pennsylvania.



AGELESS APPEAL

No matter his clients' location or residence, be it expansive country home or urban loft, Carloftis is adamant about integrating vegetables, even if it is just a container with a tomato—anything that hooks people into the joys of growing vegetables. “You don't need a big garden; you can grow vegetables in a small plot and you'll get hooked,” he says. “We all like vegetable gardens for the same reasons. There's something about going outside, grabbing a tomato, or cutting basil. There's something very, very basic about that, no matter who you are. It speaks to all of us.”

Jon plants vegetables in his own garden, too—for their structure, beauty, and yes, for their bountiful harvest. “Vegetables are very beautiful, especially plants such as lettuce, chard, or leafy vegetables,” Carloftis says. “My vegetable garden at home is my favorite garden.”

LIFELONG LESSONS

The lessons in community and gardening that growing vegetables provide are invaluable for young children, Jon has found. “Vegetable gardening inspires a real respect for Mother Nature,” Carloftis says. “Any child that grows up without a gourd or a tomato is missing out. There's not a better thing you could do with kids.”

It may be work—harsh winters or rainy springs—but Jon looks forward to seeing—and sharing—the baskets of chard, broccoli, and tomatoes each year from that tidy Pennsylvania garden. “People who say that vegetable gardening is a lot of work—well, everything that is beautiful is a lot of work,” Carloftis says. “You can't be afraid to fail. Mother Nature is tough, but she always gives you next year.” ■



Five vegetables to plant

It's a hard choice to make, but if Jon Carloftis had to narrow his vegetables to a top five, here's the list.

'Bright Lights' Swiss chard: Its three colors are brilliant, and it has no pest problems.

Nasturtiums: It's not truly a vegetable, but these edible flowers are easy to grow and perfect for children. Put them in the ground, and they come up every time. “How can you not love it?” Carloftis says.

Heirloom tomatoes: Once you eat an heirloom, you don't want anything else, he says.

Spring onions/scallions: Carloftis loves spring onions—you can plant them when it's cold, and they keep on giving. Depending on your climate, with a fall planting, you can harvest them all winter.

Elephant garlic: Elephant garlic keeps on getting bigger—and it's wonderful for use in recipes.

Tips for your vegetables

Here are the top tips Jon Carloftis has learned from all his years of gardening for himself and others.

Mix it up. Plant some flowers, add a bench—make it visually appealing.

Check out the view. Make it beautiful as well as functional, from inside your house and outside, too.

Stake your tomatoes. Get them up off the ground, tying them with old socks or hosiery to avoid damaging the stalks.

Watch any pesticides. Remember, you're eating what you grow.