

The Backyard Farm Company, from Marin, California, created this English Potager garden in Novato to give high-yields of vegetables and flowers and be a pleasant space in its own right.

SASHA GULISH

YOUR SPRING GARDEN CHECKLIST

What to do in your garden now, no matter where you are in the West.

Story by DEANNA KIZIS

PLANT

- Create an herb meadow by sprinkling seeds of cilantro, dill, and parsley in sunny garden beds that are close to the kitchen for easy access.
- For instant impact in warm climates, plant durable barrel cactus. Try Mexican fire barrel (*Ferocactus pringlei*) for red spines; for yellow, go for the ever-popular golden barrel (*Echinocactus grusonii*).
- Plant tomatoes outside once daytime and nighttime temperatures stay above 55°.

PROTECT

- Slugs do maximum damage in spring by mowing down tender seedlings as they emerge. Bait for them or kill them as you see them (they're easy to spot in damp weather or after you water).
- Combat powdery mildew by hosing off foliage in the morning several times a week to wash away fungus spores. Treat outbreaks with a formula of 1 Tbsp. baking soda plus 1 Tbsp. canola oil to 1 gallon water.

- Use plastic baskets from cherry tomatoes or strawberries to protect newly sprouted seedlings from birds. By the time the seedlings have grown tall enough to reach through the tops of the baskets, they are no longer as tender as the birds prefer.
- Check for birds' nests before pruning shrubs and trees; leave them alone until eggs have hatched and baby birds are out of the nest.
- For easiest removal, hoe weeds in the early morning

the day after watering.

MAINTAIN

- Replenish organic mulch on planting beds. To prevent evaporation of soil moisture, aim for a mulch layer of 2–4 inches deep. Do not pile it around plant stems.
- Divide overcrowded clumps of ornamental grasses by cutting back their tops and slicing the root ball into sections with a shovel. Transplant divisions immediately and water regularly until the grasses are re-established.



Backyard Farm Basics

■ Say you've jumped into gardening full throttle, planted your raised beds, and then you have ... problems. Who you gonna call? May I suggest the Backyard Farm Company? The brainchild of Marin, California, landscape architect Christian Douglas, this coalition of designers and farmers has all the resources you'll need, from their "Phone a Farmer" service to e-books to a downloadable course for newbies. "The company sprung out of a desire to create a live platform for people to build knowledge," Douglas says. "We want people to have confidence when it comes to growing their own food."

THE BACKYARD FARM COMPANY'S TOP 5 TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

1/Plug and Plays

"We want people to build on their successes," Douglas says, "so starting with easy plants are best." He recommends radishes, leafy greens, summer squash, and cherry tomatoes.

2/Go Vertical

"Typically, an eight-by-four-foot vegetable planter box can grow a lot of food if you use arches and trellises to maximize your vertical growing space," Douglas says. But before you go sky-high, consider how much time you have on a week-to-week basis to tend to your plants.

3/Seed for Success

Some plants do better if you start them as seeds; others grow better if you start them as seedlings. Douglas recommends direct sowing root vegetables like beets, carrots, turnips, and

legumes. Tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, and cucumber benefit from being started as seedlings first.

4/Spoil Your Soil

"We often say we feed the soil; we don't feed the plants," says Douglas. "It's a bit like our immune system—weak soil makes plants more susceptible to disease and predators." To amend the soil, add organic matter like compost, worm castings, and compost tea.

5/Aesthetics Matter

Douglas is a big proponent of making a vegetable garden stylized as opposed to treating it like a second-class citizen. He recommends investing in obelisks, trellises, plant labels, and pretty pots. Says Douglas, "Elevate your materials to make your garden important. The key is to celebrate it."



Dare to Dahlia

As America's dahlia obsession continues, I'm sometimes asked how and when to plant tubers. One way is to plant them the same time you plant your tomatoes; another is after the last frost, which, depending on your area, is between April and June. Other tips for success: Stake your dahlias when you plant so you don't damage roots later; plant the tuber a few inches deep with the crown (the part with the eye) face up; and pinch back the top of the plant a few times over growing season, so the plant will put more energy into growing blooms.

FROM TOP LEFT: SASHA GULISH; THOMAS J. STORY

COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: © DEREK R. TRIMBLE (2); STOREY PUBLISHING



Happy Vibes

■ Kelly Smith Trimble, the author of *The Creative Vegetable Gardener: 60 Ways to Cultivate Joy, Playfulness, and Beauty Along with a Bounty of Food* (\$19.99; Storey Publishing), doesn't always view gardens in a typical way. Yes, her book is full of solid advice for the newcomer and seasoned gardener alike, but there are also gems throughout that make her work stand out.

"A garden can be really good for mindfulness," Trimble says, recommending that you meditate in the garden. "You can sit in silence and listen to the ambient noise," she says, adding, "In the book, I wrote about using the loving-kindness meditation because I think it's a good starting point." To do it, you extend kindness and love from

yourself to other beings—especially your plants. Trimble is also a proponent of letting herbs and lettuces bolt once in a while—something few gardeners do, preferring instead to pull the plant and replace it with another. "If you leave the plant, you get to see and appreciate the full life cycle," she says. "And it attracts beneficial insects, too."

Finally, Trimble recommends trying yoga in the garden if there's enough room. "One of my favorite parts of writing the book is that everyone talks about their garden being their happy space," Trimble says. "Gardening is like yoga and meditation in general. Sometimes you don't want to drag yourself off the couch to do it. But if you do, you'll be honestly glad you did."

