



Split cedar stakes support an array of dahlias, all of them passed on from other gardeners. Sarah calls this open-hearted plant sharing “companion gardening” at its best. In the distance is the garden shed that once belonged to SOBO, a local restaurant. The shed was moved from the Tofino Botanical Gardens to the house site on a forklift truck. Birds regularly flock around the newly installed homemade feeder.

Rainforest Dreaming

 **By Margaret Horsfield Adam Gibbs & Sarah Platenius Photos**

“I promised Sarah she’d have a sunny property where she could garden,” John Platenius recalls. “She had a really hard time believing me when we first saw this place.” “It was November,” his wife Sarah adds, “dark and dismal and raining, and we were in the middle of dense rainforest. It was crazy – but John can be very persuasive.”

Seven years have passed since John and Sarah, then seven months pregnant with her second child, hiked into the

Here’s a glimpse of the house and a seating area through cheerful cosmos, bold ‘Lucifer’ crocosmias and a young dwarf apple tree. The garden has seven various fruit trees, a few of which were the first things Sarah planted after the area was cleared for a building site when there was nothing but a mess of clay and mud.

ADAM GIBBS PHOTOS

bush to check out this acre of raw virgin forest. No trail led to the property, so to reach it they bushwhacked through a jungle of trees about five miles outside Tofino. Struggling through salal bushes and salmonberries, they skirted giant cedars, clambered over windfalls and slithered down a gulley and across a stream. The distance from the road was only a few hundred meters – but getting there took nearly half an hour.

“I felt we could make this place work,” John enthuses. “My aim was



Hops and climbing roses scale the pergola near the main entrance of the house. The acid-stained concrete stepping stones lead past tasty nasturtiums whose leaves and flowers are picked regularly for salads, along with a wealth of other salad fixings.

to have sun on our patio on December 21st, the darkest day of the year – and I knew it was possible.”

Talk about cockeyed optimism. They were hemmed in by trees, some of them hundreds of years old and nearly 100' (30.5m) high, in one of the soggiest, boggiest rainforests in the world, with over 300cm (10') of rain annually. Dream on, thought their dubious friends.

The 30-something couple dreamed on. They took their time, observing the area season by season over two years, calculating angles of light, figuring out drainage, assessing the forest, learning about wind direction and windfall trees. When the time came to clear the site for construction, they knew a number of large trees, and several smaller ones, had to come down. “We probably took down more than most people would have done – we took a lot of advice,” John says. 12,000 board feet of lumber resulted, much of it used in their house.

Now accessible by a gravel driveway and a bridge over the stream, their south-facing house stands in a light and open clearing of about half an acre. It overlooks a dozen or so curved garden beds, all different sizes, the bed nearest the driveway lined with rose bushes. Young fruit trees stand in the centre of these beds, and a rose and clematis-covered pergola leads to half a dozen veggie beds tucked into the eastern lee of the house. The glass-roofed patio faces south, covered with white Japanese wisteria; lavender and sage grow just underneath its eaves.

Many whimsical touches brighten the garden: a small decorative plum tree hung with crystals; a corner for the children's garden scattered with shells and painted rocks; another plum tree bearing garlands of ribbon; a small



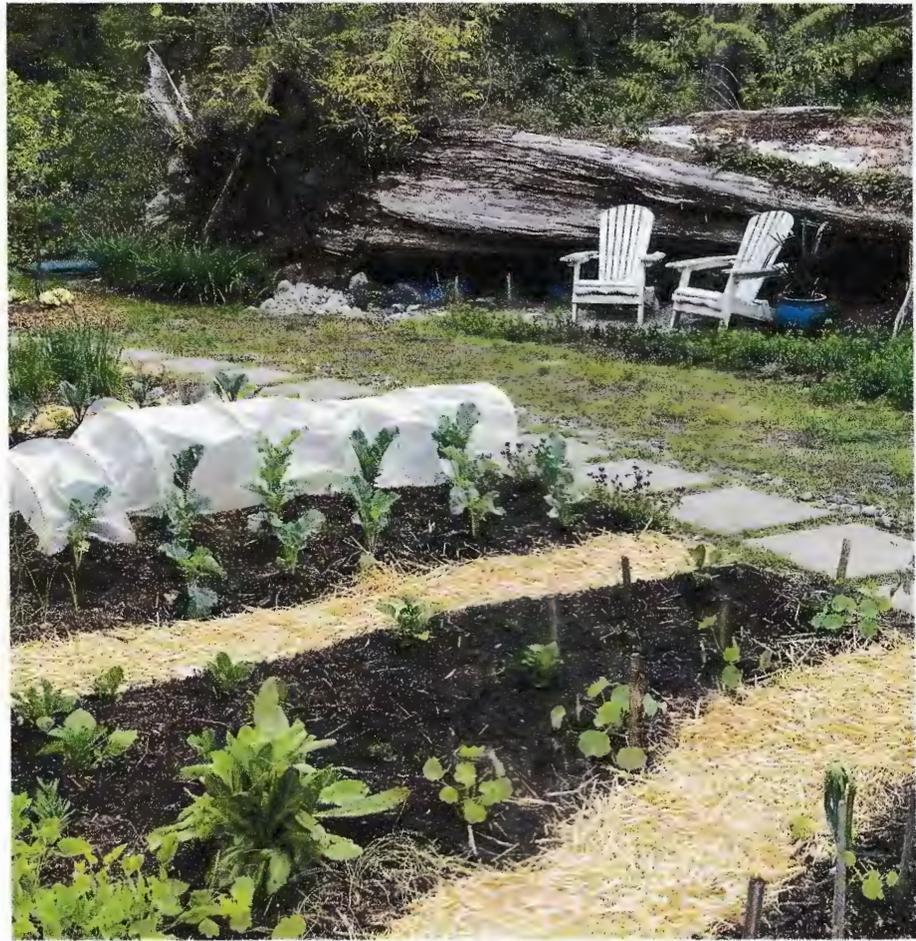
Dahlias and Jerusalem artichokes line an outer bed leading towards the grapevines and climbing nasturtiums that twine around the patio posts. Basil is given some extra warmth in the cold frame on the patio.

Straw paths are tucked between early signs of potatoes, broccoli, purple cabbage and chives. The mini hoop house protects young seedlings. Alongside a giant old-growth cedar nurse-log is a hidden corner where you can sit and wiggle your toes in the mint patch beside a small pond fringed with forget-me-nots and calla lilies.

pond with a healthy array of water plants under a windfall cedar on the edge of the clearing.

None of this could have happened without good drainage. During the house construction, John and Sarah brought in load after load of blast rock and crushed gravel, up to 3' (91cm) deep in some sections, topped with many truckloads full of sand to level everything off. This ensured drainage, but no soil whatsoever, just rock and sand over the natural clay layer underlying the forest.

Creating garden beds in this soilless environment led Sarah to some serious reading and research. She now follows the basic principles of permaculture: working with the environment and using organic material at hand. Most of the garden beds took shape in the fall, one or two at a time. Sarah



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SARAH PLATENIUS PHOTO

Better than an Easter egg hunt, Chloe digs potatoes. She and her brother Reed enjoy the freedom in their own garden plots, but they also love to help harvest mint for tea, arrange cut flowers to sell at impromptu roadside stands, and dig worms and grubs that they feed to the chickens as a special treat.

would place cardboard in the desired shape, then thickly pile on layers of whatever organic matter she could obtain: compost, seaweed, leaves, straw, and best of all, the delicious peat moss/manure-rich material from the chicken coop, where several hens have proven to be a gardener's best friend. When local material wasn't sufficient, she would buy a truckload of fish compost. The new beds are protected with plastic cloches and mulch during the winter rains; the organic material, which Sarah frequently turns, quickly decomposes. By spring the new bed is ready for planting. "It's just the beginning, though. I'm always working on making more soil," Sarah comments. She digs with her bare hands into the rich, rough loam she has created in the latest bed. "Isn't this beautiful?"

Sarah's early gardening experience provides an almost comical contrast to this rainforest life. Raised in California, she loved the sun-drenched family garden in La Jolla, the bougainvillea and lemon verbena, and the roses her grandmother always wore in her hair. For two years in her youth she lived on an avocado farm near San Diego, where orange and pomegranate trees flourished. "And then I found myself in Arizona for four years attending college," she laughs.

Yet in Arizona, Sarah learned her basic gardening skills when she took an organic gardening course out in the desert, an area plagued by gophers and drought. "That's where I learned about finding nutrient-rich material in unlikely places, making the most of what's available locally to create soil and to protect it." So while folks



SARAH PLATENIUS PHOTO

Chickens enjoy free range of the garden picking up slugs, cabbage and cutworms at certain times of the year when delicate seedlings are not at risk. Kitchen and garden waste is put into the chicken coop and mixed with wood chips or peat moss. The chickens enrich this mixture with their manure and voilà! – an on-site compost factory.

originally called *The Stump Nook*, this building served as a guesthouse for friends and family until the kids took it over as a playhouse – and then its most useful purpose was moved in. The six chickens are long-term garden residents, happily occupying their domain from their special house built by John and his dad on top of a stump and made from western red cedar wood and milled on the property. The kids collect eggs daily, and the chicken manure is an invaluable ingredient in Sarah's soil.

Arizona might rely on cover crops and mulch, Sarah now values alder trees. "They're terrific, and they break down in about a year, turning into mulch. And alder leaves are awesome. I use them on the beds every fall." She piles on chopped-up eel grass and bull kelp from the beach, always impressed by how quickly most of it melts into the soil.

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The first to declare she is no gardening expert, Sarah nonetheless is living proof that expert knowledge cannot compete with hands-on experience and a can-do attitude. "This isn't a refined garden," she insists, "it's totally imperfect and always changing. We have a mad dog and chickens running everywhere, two crazy ideas. Experienced gardeners roll their eyes." Sarah faced quite a bit of eye-rolling, especially at the beginning. She perfected the art of listening carefully to veteran gardeners telling her what she could and could not grow here. She would nod along, then make her own decisions.

She uses a machete to chop a load of bull kelp into a layer of cardboard sheet mulch. The kelp will become a new garden bed by early spring after leaves, sand and compost are added. Bull kelp drifts to shore in early winter and is quick to break down, adding organic elements and minerals to budding soil.



ADAM GIBBS PHOTO



SARAH PLATENIUS PHOTO



Daughter Chloe half-hidden amongst garlic, blueberries and bachelor buttons, wears a flower crown picked from the garden.

"I learn a lot from other gardeners, but I also observe a lot. I really like looking at older gardens around here, seeing what early settlers grew."

Before they married, Sarah and John worked as caretakers at Cougar Annie's garden, the renowned, remote pioneer garden on Vancouver Island's West Coast. Sarah's experience of Zone 9 gardening jolted into action there, as day by day she roamed this charmed five-acre garden out in the wilderness, marvelling at what she found and identifying species. She learned about Cougar Annie's remarkable orchard, where over 20 varieties of apples flourished. She heard stories of how this tough pioneer would plant anything she could obtain, no matter how unlikely, even growing carnations at one point. Sarah also took note of Cougar Annie's impressive variety of trees and shrubs, planted simply out of curiosity to see what would survive – even a linden tree.

Never afraid to experiment, Sarah follows Cougar Annie's example in that she'll try anything once, just to see what happens. "Sometimes I think we've forgotten what's possible in this climate," Sarah says. "You really can grow things like dahlias and sweet peas and roses around here – and they're such sun lovers. People seem so surprised." Last summer, Sarah and her daughter sold their vegetables and flowers, including lavish bunches of dahlias and sweet peas, at the Tofino Public Market.

Sarah never had, and still doesn't have, an overall plan for the garden. "I sort of felt my way into it," she muses. "John probably would have mapped and planned on graph paper, but I'm not good with measuring tapes and levels. And I'm the one doing the work and figuring out what I can grow."

John nods. "I just helped get the setting right, and I help with the heavy lifting – but it's her creation."

"I work by trial and error," Sarah continues, "and I don't like to overanalyze it, in case I jinx what I'm doing. Yet she clearly holds to several solid principles in producing her happy abundance of flowers and vegetables. She uses no chemicals or pesticides, so she constantly builds the soil with organic matter, and the garden has no straight lines or boxed-in raised beds ("They look so constrained!"). She also wants the garden to be in harmony with the surrounding forest; on the edge of the clearing, her beds seem to merge into the forest, and rhododendrons thrive amid salal and various species of huckleberries.

Initially, Sarah wanted a garden featuring only edible plants, but changed her mind when she discovered the joy of what she calls "companion gardening" – the fact that fellow gardeners are so keen to share. Whenever friends divide plants or re-do their gardens, Sarah arrives with pots and a pickaxe.

truck, delighted to take leftovers, pop them in, and see what happens. Fearlessly, she has transplanted large rhodod, roses and other shrubs, as well as grasses, hostas, hellebores, daylilies and perennials of all sorts. "Sometimes I don't even know their names, but I just look them up." Coreopsis, Joe-Pye weed, toadflax, phlox, crocosmia, red valerian and rudbeckia have all been amongst the "mystery flowers" later identified. So the garden beds have filled and flowed towards and around various garden structures: the shed, the chicken house, the pergola and the playground areas.

"I like change, and especially from the kitchen window I don't want to see the same plants every year, so I'm always changing the pattern." Every autumn finds Sarah boldly moving plants in the serene conviction that they will be just fine. "I think I've moved the white peony three times," she comments nonchalantly – and the peony clearly doesn't mind at all. She banishes overly enthusiastic perennials – *lysimachia*, *camellia*, Shasta daisies, asters, and their ilk – to the outer limits of her beds backing onto the forest. Relocation to the "woodchip corner" is another option, where an irrepressible *Euphorbia amygdaloides* var. *robbiae* wood spurge cheerfully thrives. "When I move plants I'm amazed at how hardy they are. I love to read the roots and figure out where to put them and what they can take."

A few central features of the garden always remain the same: the bed of white perennials, the hellebores, the roses and the carefully protected herb garden up against the house. Sarah also pays particular attention to the vegetable beds, planting nitrogen fixing peas and beans in rotation, constantly amending the soil and protecting it with clothes leaf mulch or straw against the winter rains.

Following the halcyon days of summer, these rains always return, heavy and hard. But in this mild wet climate, life is always stirring in the garden. Even in December roses persist, hellebores bloom, bulbs poke through, the veggie garden produces its winter greens and the heaped organic material on the garden feels warm to the touch, deep down. Come December 21st, if the rains ease up, winter sunshine will indeed touch the patio, just as it has before – just as John hoped.

And in this rainforest garden, they dream on.®



BRITISH COLUMBIA

VanDusen Events: Touch Wood, July 1-Sept 30. A celebration of wood by 12+ BC artists & sculptors. **EPIC: The Sustainable Living Festival, July 6 & 7, 10am-9pm.** Info: epicfest.ca **HSBC Family Programs: Around the World in 20 Plants, July 14, 10:30am-12pm or 1:30-3pm.** Take a trip around the globe without leaving the garden! **Impressions of VanDusen, Aug 11, 10:30am-12pm or 1:30-3pm.** Keep a botanical journal using a selection of impression techniques. Both programs are for kids ages 5-11. Must be accompanied by an adult. Member family \$15, general \$25 per program (includes Garden admission). Must pre-reg: 604-718-5898, familyprograms@vandusen.org VanDusen Garden: 5251 Oak St, Vancouver. Info: 604-257-8335, www.vandusengarden.org

Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden Enchanted Evenings Concert Series, July 5, 12, 19, 26 & Aug 2, 9, 16, 23 & 30. Celebrate the Enchanted Evening's 20th anniversary season with a range of musical performances including Peking Opera, jazz, blues & Afro Cuban rhythms. Admission \$20/members, \$25/general. 578 Carrall St, Vancouver. For info: Gillian 604-662-3207 x 204, marketing@vancouverchinesegarden.com, www.vancouverchinesegarden.com

Grand Forks Art Gallery Soc presents the Gallery 2 Garden Tour, July 6, 9am-4pm. Tour some of the best gardens in Boundary Country. Gardens in Grand Forks & Greenwood will be open for the first time. Tix \$15, lid number of bus passes. Art Gallery: 524 Central Ave, Grand Forks. Info: Dawsha 250-442-5835, 250-442-2211, gtag3@shaw.ca, www.gallery2grandforks.ca

The Iris & Victoria Lily Society Show & Plant Sale, July 6, 10am-4pm. Admission by donation. Citadel, 4030 Douglas St, Victoria. Info: Bryce 250-294-4402, brycefradley@hotmail.com

Cranbrook Garden Club presents Cranbrook Open Garden Day, July 7, 10am-3:30pm. Self-guided tour of 6 local gardens. Tix \$10, available at Lotus Books & Top Crop. Info: Frankie 250-426-5650, kreekie@shaw.ca

Mid Island Floral Arts Club Meeting, July 11, 2pm. Demo by Shirley Basciano, Darlene Ellwood & Margaret Leeuw on developing creations for Forest Fantasies in September. Everyone welcome. Guests \$5. St. Stephen's Church Hall, 150 Village Way, Qualicum Beach. Info: Catherine 250-937-1350, www.mifac.org

Erikson's Daylily Gardens Open House Event, July 13 & 14, 10am-4pm. Enjoy harp music in the garden, VanDusen Master Gardeners & more. Visit the Aldergrove Daylily Society's tent to view sale items & enter the fun raffle. Erikson's Daylily gardens: 24642 51 Ave, Langley. Info: 604-856-5758, www.eriksonsdaililygardens.com

For the Love of Africa Society Water Garden Tour, July 13, 9:30am-4:30pm. Enjoy a self-guided tour of 10 of Victoria's most beautiful water gardens. Water garden designers will be on hand at 5 of the gardens & many will have musicians. Tix \$20, available at www.watergardentour.ca and at most Victoria garden centres. Info: 250-891-0762, fortheloveofafricasociety@gmail.com

Vancouver Rose Society Meeting – Starting Over with a Country Garden: Was Your Cake Baked? Mine Was! with guest speaker Thomas Hobbs, July 16, 7:30pm. Admission \$10 for non-members, can be applied to \$30 yearly membership. VanDusen Floral Hall, 5251 Oak St, Vancouver. Info: Mary dlmirv@hotmail.com, www.vancouverrosesociety.org

Submit and view more listings via our website: www.gardenswest.com

North Peace Horticultural Society Garden Tour, July 21, 10am-4pm. Visit gardens in & around the city of Fort St. John. Tix \$10/adults, \$8/seniors, 12 & under free. **Annual Flower Show, Aug 23-25.** You will be amazed by what our gardeners bring to this show! Entries accepted on Fri from 6-8pm & Sat from 8-10am. Open to the public on Sat from 3-7pm & Sun from 11am-4pm. Show held at the North Peace Cultural Centre. Info: Ellen 250-787-7998

Perennial Plant Symposium Seminar, July 21. Theme: Perennial Plants & Design – A Perfect Combination. Guest speakers include Todd Boland, David Culp, Thomas Hobbs & more. Registration \$99 USD. Full-time students \$50 USD. Sheraton Wall Centre Hotel, 1088 Burrard St, Vancouver. For more info: 614-771-8431, ppa@perennialplant.org, www.perennialplant.org

BC Fuchsia & Begonia Society Annual Show & Competition, July 27, 10am-5pm & July 28, 10am-4pm. Enjoy a plant & craft sale, vendor sale, afternoon tea, floral displays, door prizes & more. Admission \$2. Everyone welcome. VanDusen Garden, 5251 Oak St, Vancouver. Info: 604-888-3274

Milner Gardens Art & Photography in the Garden, Aug 10 & 11, 10am-5pm. Artists will be painting, sketching, carving & photographing the beauty of this Artist's Garden. Milner Gardens: 2179 West Island Hwy, Qualicum Beach. Info: 250-752-6153, www.milnergardens.org

Vancouver Orchid Society Summer Sale of Orchids & Companion Plants, Aug 17, 10am-4pm in the VanDusen Floral Hall, 5251 Oak St, Vancouver. Info: www.vancouverorchidsociety.ca

67th Annual Victoria Dahlia Society Show, Aug 17, 9:30am-5:30pm & Aug 18, 11am-5pm at Westshore Town Centre in Langford. Everyone is welcome to enter or drop by to check out a great collection of dahlias. For more info: vdspublicity@gmail.com

Historic Stewart Farm Botany Walk, Aug 24, 10am-12pm. Discover natural remedies & other herbal wonders as you explore the park & farm with an expert herbalist. Learn to identify a variety of "plants with a purpose." Cost: \$15 (ages 16+). Must pre-register. Historic Stewart Farm, 13723 Crescent Rd, Surrey. Info: 604-592-6956, www.surrey.ca/heritage

Valley Fuchsia & Geranium Club Annual Show & Competition, Aug 24, 10am-3pm. Free admission. St. Andrew's Anglican Church Hall, 20955 Old Yale Rd, Langley. Info: 604-459-2837

USA

Sequim Lavender Farm Faire, July 19-21. The Faire brings all things lavender together with the world-famous Heritage Lavender Farm Tour and Lavender Arts and Crafts Faire in the Park. The Heritage Lavender Farm Tour features the stunning and iconic lavender farms. Each farm is a festival with fields of lavender, hundreds of lavender products, workshops, demonstrations, u-cut lavender, crafts, food, beverages, music and more. Tix \$10 in advance, \$15 during the weekend. Children under 12 free. For more information: info@sequimlavenderfarms.org

18th Annual Edmonds in Bloom Garden Tour, July 21. Visit 6 beautiful gardens, including a Zen garden, rare species rhodod & overflowing vegetable beds. Tix \$15, available online as well as from local merchants. Visit website for vendor list. Info: www.edmondsinbloom.com