

## The New York Times

# How Does the Hamptons Garden Grow? With a Lot of Paid Help

By **Stacey Stowe**

Sept. 5, 2017

EAST HAMPTON, N.Y. — The rigors of vegetable gardening, for most people, are humble and gritty: planting, weeding, dirtying knees, working up a sweat and maybe straining a back muscle or two.

But here on the gilded acres of Long Island's East End, a different skill set often applies: hiring a landscape architect to design the garden, a gardener and crew to plant and pamper the beds, and sometimes even a chef to figure out what to do with the bushels of fresh produce. All that's left is to pick the vegetables — though employees frequently do that, too.

The hardest-worked muscles may be in the hand writing the checks: These lavish, made-to-order gardens can cost as much as \$100,000, said Alec Gunn, a Manhattan landscape architect whose firm designs high-end residential, commercial and public-works projects throughout the country.



The gardens that the chef Kevin Penner manages for a three-home compound in Bridgehampton, have a formal parterre design with gravel paths separating geometric

planting beds, lined with trimmed boxwoods and filled with vegetables, flowers and herbs. Daniel Gonzalez for The New York Times

“And it is not the plants that are driving the cost,” Mr. Gunn said. One 2015 project of his in Southampton with a six-figure price tag includes an underground irrigation system, a potting shed, an orchard and a meadow for a cutting garden. Many gardens require expensive hedges or other barriers to protect them from ocean winds and the ubiquitous deer.

The bespoke vegetable garden, these days almost always organic, has become a particular object of desire in the Hamptons. More clients have commissioned elaborate gardens this summer than ever before, say members of the support staffs who toil on them.

“I put in 10 by July,” said Charles R. Dayton, the owner of an East Hampton landscaping company whose ancestors have owned and worked land here since 1640. “I get a kick out of it.”

About 500 farms remain on the fertile East End, even as more mansions crop up each summer on former potato fields. And the kitchen garden has been a tradition on Long Island estates since the 19th century. But today, growing your own produce is a much different enterprise on what has become some of the world’s most expensive real estate.

Two landscape architects said clients this summer had asked that their vegetables be picked, packaged and put on the Hampton Jitney for use in city kitchens. (The cost, \$25 to \$50 a parcel, is often more than for a passenger.) One gardener, Charlene Babinski, said she had installed a “juicing garden” for her client’s favorite liquid diets.

Then there are the hostess gifts and holiday honey for guests. “One client asked me to make 27 baskets of vegetables to give to her friends,” said Paul Hamilton, a Montauk farmer who plants and maintains seven luxe gardens.



Preserved vegetables from the garden of Carole Olshan and her husband, Morton, in East Hampton. Daniel Gonzalez for The New York Times

What’s driving the gardening bug among the affluent, gardeners say, is their clients’ focus on “self-care” — a curious phrase for a pursuit that requires so much help. Mr. Gunn said the impulse includes a “moral component.”

“There’s so much wealth,” he said. “It’s ‘Let’s take something I’ve been fortunate to have and put it back into the environment. I want to do something to reduce what I’m taking.’ ”

Christopher LaGuardia, a landscape architect based in Water Mill who designs raised beds with black locust wood for vegetables and herbs, said his clients were interested in reducing their carbon footprint by producing vegetables that don’t need to be trucked in. “Plus, they are contributing to biodiversity, pollinators,” he said. “We discourage the big lawn.”



Cabbage growing in a garden designed and tended by Paul Hamilton in East Hampton.  
Daniel Gonzalez for The New York Times

But others liken the professionally tended garden to a vintage car or a Hinckley yacht — yet another means of flaunting wealth.

“I think people have just run out of status symbols,” said Steven Gaines, whose 1998 book, “Philistines at the Hedgerow: Passion and Property in the Hamptons,” tracked the peregrinations of its richest and most colorful residents. In the years since the book was published, said Mr. Gaines, who lives in Wainscott, in East Hampton, “it’s all gotten more intense — the competition has taken over in all sorts of peculiar ways.”

“God has given you too much money when you have someone else tend your vegetable garden,” he said.

**FOR ALEXANDRA MUNROE**, the senior curator of Asian art at the Guggenheim Museum, the roughly 5,000-square-foot vegetable garden — she calls it the Farm — just outside the 1928 neo-Palladian home she shares with her husband, Robert Rosenkranz, is “the center of the meal.”

“We feast here,” Ms. Munroe said, gesturing toward the flower-fringed vegetable garden nestled on a rise overlooking Georgica Jetty, on West End Road in East Hampton. In addition to a pool and tennis court, the property includes a billiards terrace and croquet green; a hedge of *Rosa rugosa* protects the garden from winds.

Mr. Hamilton plants, weeds, hand-waters and harvests the vegetable garden, while four other gardeners work on the remainder of the five-acre property, which has perennial beds, a meadow and woodland gardens designed by Ms. Munroe, who hosts self-guided tours.



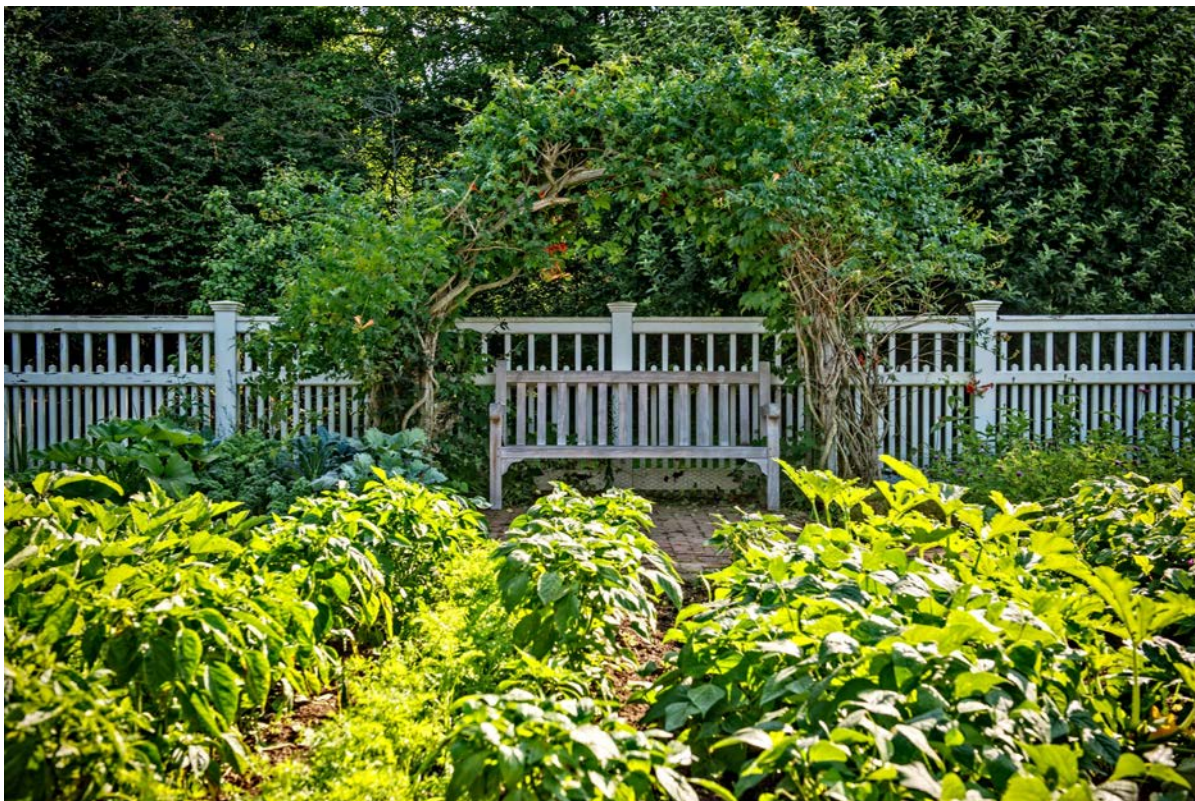
Broccoli in Ms. Munroe's East Hampton garden. Daniel Gonzalez for The New York Times

She is known to get her hands dirty. But when she arrives at the house for the weekend, there is often a basket brimming with the garden's harvest, arranged by Mr. Hamilton or the estate manager, Robert Deets.

“There is no greater thing than eating produce that's still warm from the sun that has never seen a refrigerator,” Ms. Munroe said.

Iris Keitel, a retired music industry executive who lives in Manhattan and on Meadow Lane in Westhampton Beach, tore up her Har-Tru tennis court two years ago and hired the organic gardener Suzanne P. Ruggles to plant alliums, Green Zebra tomatoes and a cornucopia of vegetables. Ms. Ruggles does most of the work, but Ms. Keitel picks her own vegetables.

“My friends and I come here to play,” Ms. Keitel said, standing next to a patch of blooming cardoons that resembled a Dr. Seuss creation. Ms. Keitel, who had a bat house and a bee pollinator installed near the former center court, cooks recipes like cucumber gazpacho, rainbow radishes with butter, and zucchini fritters with those friends.



At the home of Carole Olshan and her husband, Morton, trumpet vines form an arch over a bench in kitchen garden of their private chef, John Hamilton.

Daniel Gonzalez for The New York Times

At the ivy-draped Further Lane home of Carole Olshan and her husband, Morton, Ms. Olshan said friends like to tour the vegetable garden designed and maintained by Mr. Hamilton and set off by a picket fence on meticulously landscaped grounds.

She said Mr. Hamilton had expanded her botanical knowledge. “We can’t call them weeds,” she said with a chuckle. “They’re native plants.”

The family chef, John Hamilton (no relation to Paul), creates meals around the seasonal offerings that Paul Hamilton brings in from the garden. A recent lunch included golden and Chioggia beets, sliced cucumbers and wasabi caviar. “I told Paul to cut the kale — so sick of it,” Ms. Olshan said.



A multicolored carpet of baby salad greens in the kitchen garden of the chef John Hamilton, at the Olshans' home. Daniel Gonzalez for The New York Times

Kevin Penner, a personal chef who headed the kitchens at Cittanuova and the 1770 House in East Hampton, manages 36 raised-bed gardens and berry bushes at a contemporary, three-home compound on Meadowlark Lane in Bridgehampton. The variety of heirloom vegetables and exotic herbs — from the buckler leaf sorrel he includes in salmon dishes to the La Ratte potatoes he uses to replicate Joël Robuchon's potato purée — reflects Mr. Penner's childhood on an Iowa farm and three decades as a professional cook.

"I have control over the quality of the product with this garden," he said. "You can get lots of heirloom products, but, if you put it on a rail car the week before you get it, it's not the same."



Squash growing in geometric planting beds bordered by trimmed boxwood hedges in this vegetable garden in Bridgehampton. Daniel Gonzalez for The New York Times

At his waterfront estate on Oregon Road in Cutchogue, on the North Fork, a hedge fund manager stocks a cold cellar and freezer with fingerling potatoes or sauces of Brandywine tomatoes from a large vegetable garden.

The manager, who asked that his name not be used because his fund forbids employees to speak to the news media, buys his stock from Sang Lee Farms in Peconic. He plants and harvests his crop himself and with William Lee, an owner of Sang Lee; other gardeners weed.

“I came out this morning, grabbed some shishito peppers and an onion for an omelet,” the manager said. “So convenient.”





Blackberries in a caged berry garden in Bridgehampton.  
Daniel Gonzalez for The New York Times

One thing it is not is cost effective. “It’s a bad trade,” he said, chuckling, referring to his vegetable garden and orchard, designed by the landscape architect Stacy Paetzel, who recommended South Bay quartzite for the steps leading to the knoll-top garden and installed galvanized hardware cloth for the cedar fencing. A potting shed will include a soapstone sink and Moroccan tiles, and a raw concrete dining table will sit under a black cherry tree.

**AT LEAST ONE VEGETABLE GARDEN** of a high-profile Hampton resident is modest. The TV journalist Katie Couric grows a few plants each of tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and potatoes in a 10-by-20-foot area facing the tennis court at her East Hampton home. She plants and harvests the patch herself, with the help of her landscaper.

At her East Hampton home, the TV journalist Katie Couric has a modest vegetable garden where, with some help, she grows tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, lettuces and herbs for use in her kitchen. Daniel Gonzalez for The New York Times

Cooking the vegetables for her daughters and sharing the bounty with friends, she said, is “a real treat for me.”

“Sometimes I bring produce to friends because I hate the idea of it not being used,” she said, adding with a laugh, “but I don’t do canning — that’s not my jam.”

If there is a gardener with star quality here, it may well be Paul Hamilton. The seven vegetable gardens he plants and maintains help supplement his other pursuits: playing guitar in a gypsy jazz band, surfing, and farming two acres that supply his clients and a stand in the Springs section of East Hampton, not far from Jackson Pollock’s former home.

The garden consultant Paul Hamilton and his son Walker with a day's bounty, including squash, beets, carrots, kale, peppers and broccoli, all harvested from Ms. Munroe's oceanside vegetable garden. Daniel Gonzalez for The New York Times

Mr. Hamilton, 57, who looks a little like James Taylor, is something of a guru for his wealthy clients, but he has a low-key style. He works barefoot, sometimes in an unbuttoned, well-worn shirt, sometimes with the help of his two sons and stepdaughter. There's a palpable difference between his bohemian bearing and his bejeweled clients. But he accepts it pragmatically.

"Look, this is the economy out here," he said. "These projects, these houses, are how most of us make a living." With the blessing of those who hire him, he delivers surplus produce from their gardens to the East Hampton Senior Center.

Teaching the next generation to appreciate growing one's own food is important for Ms. Babinski, a professional gardener whose family began operating a farm stand in Water Mill in the early 1970s.

"When a child pulls up a carrot from under the ground for the first time, you can't beat that smile," she said.

But Ms. Babinski said she had seen the initial excitement of a vegetable garden fade for some clients.

"They lose interest, though, after they're planted," she said. "It's the same thing with the chickens. They say, 'I have to have chickens, so I can tell my friends,' but they end up giving the eggs to the help."

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 6, 2017, on Page D1 of the New York edition with the headline: Gardening With a Checkbook

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