

Covid Gardeners in a Digital Classroom: Sean and Allison McManus



Sean and Allison McManus have only one speed, and it's full speed ahead. I first met them in the lobby at their first GardenComm Annual Conference in Salt Lake City in 2019, rushing between

lectures and the tour bus. A casual seed planted with a tweet from member **C.L. Fornari** inviting them to join up had firmly taken root and their initial podcast has now grown to a popular YouTube Channel, a book deal, and even a new device to thwart squirrels.

When we first met, I was intrigued by their obvious passion for science-based gardening. They had just launched their podcast, *Spoken Garden*, but felt that they didn't really have time to develop it properly. Then, this fall, Allison, after a decade of teaching middle-school science in the Tacoma Public Schools, left her job and it wasn't long before Sean joined her so that they could focus full time on the project. "It was a huge leap for both of us," she said. "It just felt like the right time."

DIVERSE TEACHING STYLES HELP NEW GARDENERS GROW

Though they didn't know it, Sean and Allison's timing couldn't have been better. Now that there are so many new Covid Gardeners, people are hungry for consumable, and accurate, information. Sean and Allison have built a following with their podcast, providing bite-sized advice to new gardeners. You can't miss their infectious enthusiasm as they share their "DIY Garden Minute" tips and longer interviews to help beginning gardeners get up and grow.

They also started a new YouTube channel during their lockdown period, and have produced a daily quarantine video taking new gardeners along with them on their journey to improve their gardens. With Sean and Allison's deep understanding of multiple learning styles from her time in the classroom, they knew that adding a visual channel would reach and help more people. "It's been a gigantic learning curve," she said "But we're really enjoying what we're doing," added Sean. "We're either applying what we love to do,



Sean and Allison McManus use diverse teaching styles to help new gardens.

how we like to do it or we're still learning." With science-based teaching at the core of their business, their audience has found them.

GOING DIGITAL

Another completely obvious approach after teaching middle-schoolers was their decision to be fully digital. A thorough understanding about using all the social channels to reach people where they are, has led them to build up their blog, Pinterest and Instagram content in concert with the demands of podcasting and video blogging. It's a lot to manage, and a strict Google calendar helps them keep on track, alternating between research, producing, and editing all the content. Their biggest piece of advice to managing all of this? Start with one thing, keep at it on a consistent schedule, and then add another. Jump in, and

keep asking questions. Make connections, they said.

And so they did. That chance tweet from C.L. encouraged them to attend their first meeting. GardenComm member **Jessica Walliser**, with whom they had connected on Pinterest, followed up in person. She encouraged them to pitch an idea, which led to a book contract. Despite embracing the digital format, an in-print guide for first-time gardeners reaches this audience in a third way. Everyone they met on this journey has been enthusiastically supportive, something they hadn't experienced in their previous jobs.

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MOVING FORWARD

Intensely busy writing through the spring and early summer, they are now working on their marketing and monetization of their book, *The First-Time Gardener: Growing Plants and Flowers*. In February, they divided the workload with Sean, the horticulturist, providing the primary content, and Allison, as a beginning gardener herself, editing out any unclear jargon. Together they tested and filmed much of the content, ensuring their advice was easy to follow. Collaboration has been rewarding, though with too many ideas, they try to keep each other in check. Their only complaint? Running out of space in their garden for new projects.

Even after 160 consecutive days of quarantine gardening videos, there are always new ideas. One garden problem that has bedeviled Sean's mom was those pesky squirrels that kept digging up her bulbs. In their spare time, Sean and Allison devised a new two-part cage to protect the bulbs in her garden. Made of 100% recycled materials, they have devised a prototype bulb planter, and are now learning all about injection molding and how to scale this to launch a physical product in stores soon.

Throughout their garden communication journey, Sean and Allison have discovered that people today really do want to learn about gardening, but may have been afraid to start. Sean and Allison's grow-with-us approach is ideal for this new-to-gardening population.

As garden communicators, it's our responsibility to create the space to allow new gardeners to learn, be comfortable making mistakes, be open to new things and ask questions. Sean and Allison have jumped in to learn all the different tech channels while staying true to their message: Anyone can grow. We can learn alongside them through quick videos, a podcast in our pocket and now, curled up on the couch, with a new book.

Their garden and their future have never looked better. 🌱

Grace Hensley is the owner of Fashion Plants LLC, where she is a garden photographer, horticultural content writer, certified professional horticulturist, ornamental container designer, zombie vegetable gardener and a Region 6 Regional Director of GardenComm.



Boggan's First Article Published

John Boggan (Region 2) is pleased to announce that his first professionally published gardening article, "Confessions of a Zone Pusher" appeared in the July/August 2020 issue of *The American Gardener* magazine.

Cohen Thankful for GardenComm Honor

Stephanie Cohen (Region 2) would like to convey her thanks and pride in receiving the recent GardenComm Hall of Fame award and for being from Region 2.

Jentz Talks about Seed Starting

Kathy Jentz (Region 2) was interviewed about seed starting for the *Gardening Made Easy Show*, an online video series that will be available free to new gardeners starting in October. The mission is to create healthy food sources no matter where you live. The content is aimed at those looking for guidance and inspiration to change their food sources, communities and lives around the planet.

Monheim's New Podcast Encourages Planting Trees

Eva Monheim (Region 2) has a new [Plant a Trillion Trees podcast](#) that began airing in August and comes out weekly. Eva's idea for the podcast came from a challenge that Michael Dirr presented her before the Coronavirus pandemic began. Fellow GardenComm members **Louise Clarke** and **Kathy Jentz** have already appeared on the show with the hope of encouraging people to continue to plant trees because a million and a billion just won't do.

Sterman Starts Grab & Grow Gardens in California

Nan Sterman (Region 6) and Mim Michelove, CEO of [Healthy Day Partners](#) started Grab & Grow Gardens for those who are having trouble feeding themselves or their families because of the COVID-19 quarantine in the San Diego, California, area.

"We have a small army of volunteers that meet twice a week to plant, pot, package and pack gardens, which we then supply to hunger-relief agencies across our county. The agencies distribute the gardens alongside food and meals," Nan said. Area businesses have provided funding and merchants supply plants or seeds.

Nearly 4,000 starter gardens have been distributed to low-income families, military families and seniors in the region. "What started as just an idea with no budget and no plan—just the drive to help—has now become a huge success," she said. 🌱



Garden Media Group has unveiled its *20th Garden Trends Report*, available free for [download now](#). The 2021 report, "The Great Reset," provides a detailed snapshot of how people are responding to the evolving dynamics within the garden industry as well as the expected trends over the

coming year. According to the report, consumers are in the middle of a great reset. And while no one knows how lives will look once the reboot is over, the 2021 Garden Trends Report analyzes how gardens can be tools for building more resilient and connected communities. [Garden Media](#) has published its highly anticipated [Garden Trends Report](#) annually since 2001. The firm offers information about trends in various formats, including a free annual report and a YouTube series. Read Garden Media's [GROW!](#) blog for trend updates and industry news. 🌱