

A man with long brown hair, wearing a red button-down shirt and dark pants, is kneeling in a greenhouse. He is holding a hose and watering a row of young green plants. The greenhouse has a metal frame and large glass panels. Two grow lights are visible hanging from the ceiling. The background shows a wooden door and more plants in the distance.

Special section Inside Seattle

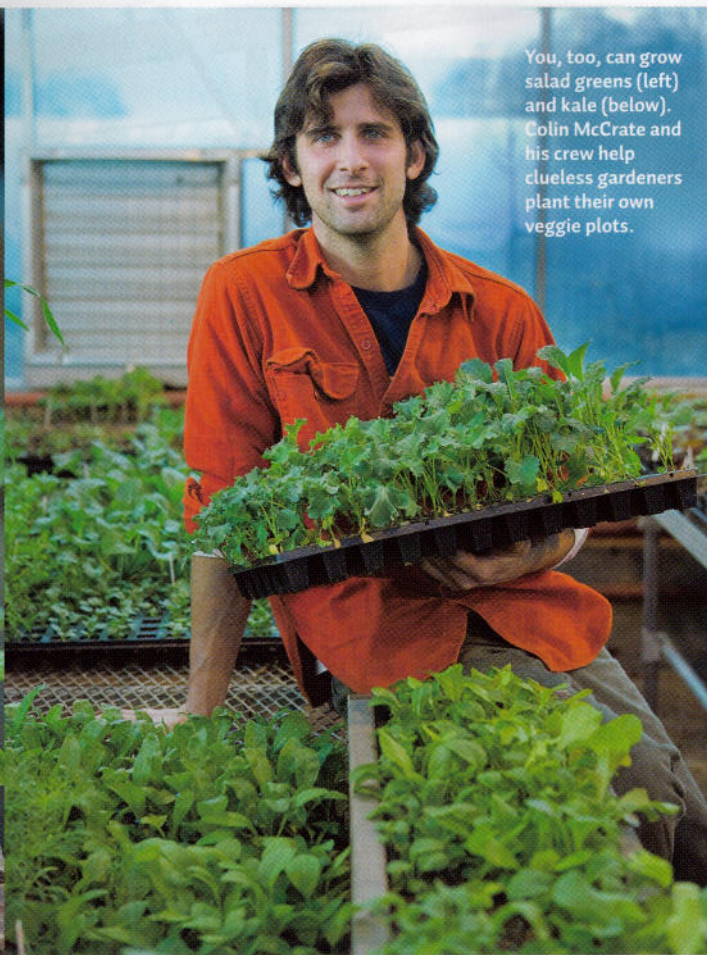
Organic gardens for all

Urban farmer Colin McCrate is on a mission

BY JESS THOMSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN GRANEN

WITH CLEAR BLUE EYES, a slim, strong build, and a drawl like Owen Wilson's, Colin McCrate might be Seattle's first celebrity gardener. At least, that's how his clients treat him. When he started Seattle Urban Farm Company a year ago, Colin wanted to bring his organic-farming skills to an urban environment. By planning, building, and maintaining small vegetable plots in

City farmer Colin McCrate cultivates corn and sunflowers in his greenhouse.



You, too, can grow salad greens (left) and kale (below). Colin McCrate and his crew help clueless gardeners plant their own veggie plots.

people's yards, Colin helps his clients reconnect with the food chain, often introducing families to gardening for the first time.

"A lot of farmers are very solitary folks," he says. "I enjoy talking to people. And I hope, on some level, Seattle Urban Farm Company connects Seattleites to the farmers outside the city."

With gardens scattered all over town, Colin has an exploding client list that demands a larger staff. This summer, he plans to organize maintenance teams by neighborhood; ideally, teams will commute from house to house by bike, with compost and seeds in tow.

Tagging along for a day

8:13 a.m. The gas gauge on Colin's battered truck hasn't worked in months, so to play it safe, we head to Dr. Dan's Biodiesel for a fill-up.

8:42 a.m. At Portage Bay Café, we down pancakes made with local flour as Colin tells how he starts plants all winter, both in his rented greenhouse space and at his nursery in Crown Hill.

10:37 a.m. We weed two small raised beds, plant arugula seeds, and nestle kale and chard seedlings next to the broccoli. Colin explains that successional planting optimizes space and ensures a continuous harvest.

When we stop at one family's house, 3-year-old Kate bursts outside in her garden hat. She has a better vegetable vocabulary than most adults, thanks to Colin's weekly appointments. "The kohlrabi's ready to be picked," she says, pointing

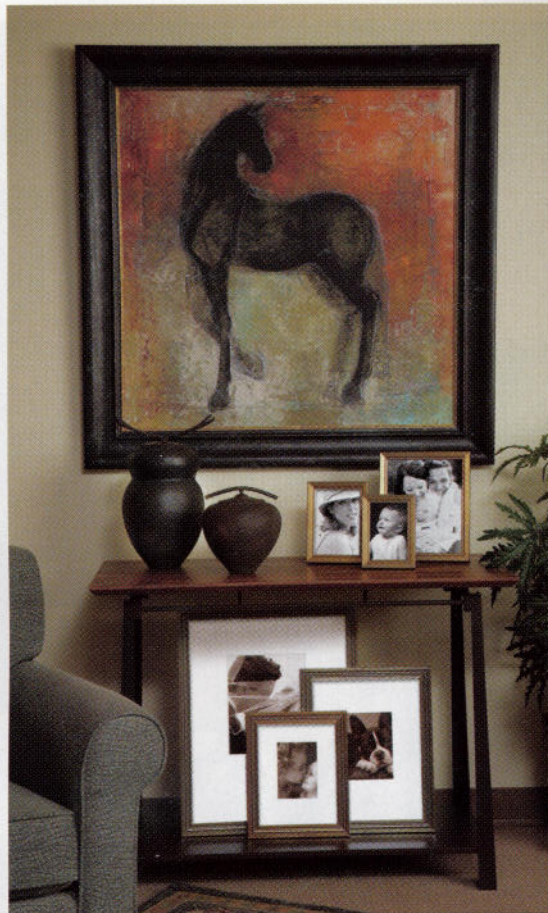
11:20 a.m. At client Martha Jacobs's house in the Maple Leaf neighborhood, her 3-year-old daughter, Kate, bursts outside in her garden hat. She's happy to see Colin and Brad Halm, his business partner, and shows them how much the "oinga-boingas"—her word for curly cucumber tendrils—have grown in the past week. Notwithstanding those tendrils, Kate has a better vegetable vocabulary than most adults, thanks to Colin's weekly appointments. "The kohlrabi's ready to be picked," she says, pointing, then shows me

the giant, ripe 'Pruden's Purple' tomato they're going to have for dinner. Colin and Martha work on plans for a chicken coop.

12:41 p.m. The back of the truck is running out of diatomaceous earth, which Colin and Brad lay down around vegetables

as a slug deterrent. So we hit Walt's Organic Fertilizer Co. for more, plus fertilizer and crushed oyster shells, which neutralize soil acidity and which also help to ward off slugs.

1:05 p.m. At a small garden in Ballard, Brad shows me how to cut the tops off brussels sprouts stalks to maximize sprout size for harvesting a couple of weeks later. He leaves the tops for the client, with a message about how to cook the leaves. "We like to show people how to use every edible part of each plant," Colin says. **>48D**



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2:12 p.m. When I ask about lunch, Colin and Brad laugh. "We actually tend to ignore our bellies during the day," admits Colin. Some days, they picnic at the Center for Urban Horticulture (at the University of Washington Botanic Gardens), which also has a library that Colin uses. But today it's raining, so we stop at La Carta de Oaxaca. They map out plans for a fruit-preservation class they're teaching next week at Carkeek Park Environmental Learning Center, and discuss designing rooftop gardens for some of Seattle's eco-friendly condo projects.

3:20 p.m. Back at Urban Farm's nursery, we plant cold-weather vegetables, tucking butterhead lettuce, kale, and spinach seeds beneath thin veneers of soil.

4:35 p.m. Brad heads out to do maintenance on two Ballard gardens, while Colin turns his attention to buckets of roots, weeds, and leaves. He'll drop the material off later on his planting-soil run to Pacific Topsoils, where it'll be made into compost. Tonight, Colin will grab a beer at Seattle Greendrinks, a networking event for people interested in environmental and sustainability issues, then head home and make dinner—from his garden, of course.

INFO Seattle Urban Farm Company (seattleurbanfarmco.com or 206/816-9740) charges an installation fee (from about \$500 for a small garden) and a maintenance fee (\$40 per hour).

Follow the urban farmer

Carkeek Park Environmental Learning Center

Classes from \$3.50; 950 N.W. Carkeek Park Rd.; seattle.gov/parks/environment/carkeek.htm or 206/684-0877.

Center for Urban Horticulture Closed Sun; free; 3501 N.E. 41st St.; uwbotanicgardens.org or 206/543-8616.

Dr. Dan's Biodiesel 912 N.W. 50th St. and 6500 15th Ave. N.E.; www.drkansbiodiesel.com or 206/783-5728.

La Carta de Oaxaca \$; closed Sun; 5431 Ballard Ave. N.W.; 206/782-8722.

Pacific Topsoils

Multiple locations; pacifictopsoils.com or 425/337-2700.

Portage Bay Café \$; 4130 Roosevelt Way N.E.; 206/547-8230.

Seattle Greendrinks Second Tue of the month; free; seattlegreendrinks.org

Walt's Organic Fertilizer Co. Open Sat through Feb, then Tue-Sat; 1528 N.W. Leary Way; waltsorganic.com or 206/297-9092. ■