



FOR GARDENERS MOVING TO THE ISLAND

The Gardener's Guide

CENTRAL ISLAND • 2026 EDITION

*A long season, a mild coast, and ground that grows almost anything.
Where it thrives, what to know, and how to find a place you can grow.*

Travis Bach and Kiel Bach
RE/MAX Professionals • Central Vancouver Island

bachrealestate.ca

WELCOME

You'll garden well here

We're Travis and Kiel Bach, and a good number of the people we help move to the Island are gardeners, growing vegetables, flowers, fruit, or all three. It comes up early, because where and how you can garden is part of why people come.

The good news: this is one of the best places to garden in the country. A mild coast, a long season, and pockets so warm they grow grapes. This guide walks through the climate, what thrives, the genuine challenges, and the gardens and clubs worth knowing, then how to find a property you can actually grow on. That last part is where we come in.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- ✓ The climate, the rain shadow, and the warm pockets, with a map.
- ✓ What grows here, the growing year, greenhouses, and the genuine challenges.
- ✓ Gardens to visit, clubs to join, and what to look for in a property if gardening matters.

YOUR ISLAND TEAM



Travis Bach

REALTOR®

(250) 619-2517

travis@bachrealestate.ca



Kiel Bach

PREC*

(250) 667-4182

kiel@bachrealestate.ca

THE CLIMATE

A gardener's island

If you're coming from the prairies or central Canada, the first season here is a revelation. The east coast of the central Island is mild, maritime, and forgiving.

A mild zone. Most of the coast sits in hardiness zone 8, with Nanaimo and the Cowichan Valley at a warm 8b, and Victoria just south at 9a. For someone leaving an Alberta zone 3 or an Ontario zone 5, that is a different world: tender perennials overwinter, and the palette opens right up.

A long season. Spring comes early, with gardens waking along the Parksville and Qualicum coast by late March, and the reliably frost-free stretch runs from mid-spring into mid-autumn. In sheltered coastal pockets, hard frost is rare, and something is growing nearly year round.

Wet winters, dry summers. The pattern is close to Mediterranean: the rain falls mostly from autumn into spring, and summers are warm and dry. That shapes everything, from what you plant to how you water, and it is the single most important thing for a new Island gardener to understand.

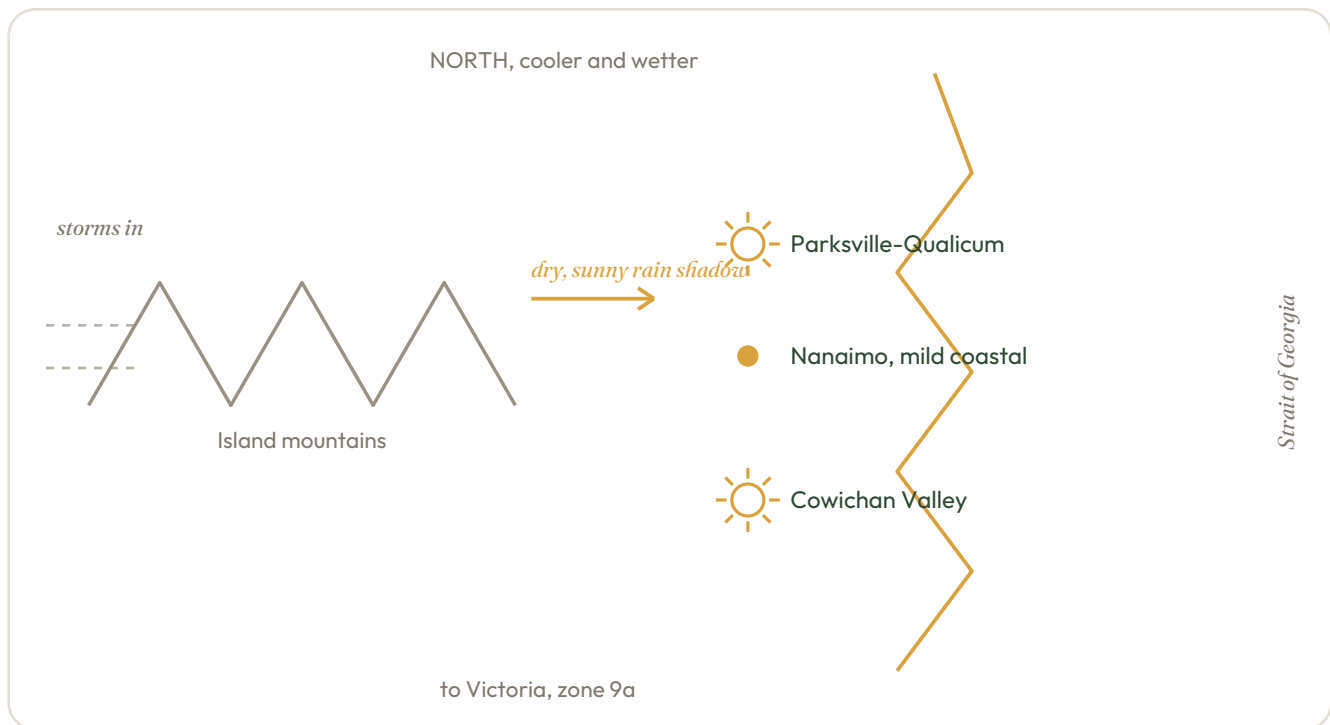
THE QUICK VERSION

Zone 8, a long frost-free season, mild wet winters, and warm dry summers. You can grow an enormous range here, and grow it for more of the year than almost anywhere in Canada. The trade is summer water, which the next pages cover.

WHERE IT'S WARMEST

The rain shadow and the warm pockets

The Island's mountains wring the rain out of incoming storms, leaving the east coast drier and sunnier than its reputation. Two pockets stand out.



Warmest and driest



Mild coastal

Inland, higher ground, and the north run cooler and wetter

Parksville and Qualicum. Tucked in the rain shadow of Mount Arrowsmith, this stretch is so mild and dry it is called Canada's Riviera, with the warmest ocean water in the country and a near-Mediterranean summer.

The Cowichan Valley. The name means warm land, and the hills shelter it from Pacific storms. It is the warmest, driest corner of the coast, and the Island's only official wine region.

WHAT THRIVES

You can grow that here?

The mild zone and long season stretch the list of what you can grow well past what most newcomers expect. A few that surprise people:

Grapes and wine. The Cowichan Valley is a recognized wine region with around a dozen estate wineries, citrusy whites and soft reds off vines that have been in the ground for decades. If a valley grows wine grapes, it will grow your tomatoes.

Figs, kiwi, and Mediterranean herbs. Figs ripen against a warm wall, hardy kiwi scrambles over a fence, and rosemary, bay, lavender, and thyme thrive in the dry summers. Lavender does so well there are farms of it.

Garlic, and a long list of vegetables. Garlic is practically an Island institution, planted in autumn and pulled the next summer. Add the brassicas, beans, squash, and salad greens, and most of the vegetable garden is easy here.

Rhododendrons, camellias, and dahlias. The acid soil and mild winters suit rhododendrons and camellias beautifully, and dahlia tubers can often stay in the ground over winter. Spring here is a flower show.

THE GROWING YEAR

Gardening through the seasons

With a season this long, the calendar looks different from the one you grew up with. Roughly how it runs:

Spring, early. Gardens wake by late March in the warm pockets. Peas, greens, and the first transplants go in while much of Canada is still frozen, and the soil is workable far earlier than newcomers expect.

Summer, dry. Warm, bright, and reliably dry. This is the season that catches people out: you are watering, not worrying about rain, and that is where irrigation and mulch earn their keep.

Autumn, long. A gentle, drawn-out close to the season. Tomatoes ripen into October, and it is also planting time, garlic, spring bulbs, and cover crops all go in now.

Winter, still growing. Year-round vegetable growing is an Island specialty. Kale, chard, leeks, and other hardy crops carry right through the cold months, and the perennials and many tender plants simply overwinter in the ground.

UNDER COVER

Greenhouses and season extension

A little cover goes a long way in this climate, and Island gardeners lean on it to stretch an already long season at both ends.

Greenhouses and polytunnels. Because winters are mild, an unheated greenhouse or polytunnel does serious work here, warming the soil early, ripening heat-lovers like peppers and eggplant in summer, and sheltering greens through winter.

Cold frames and cloches. For a smaller garden, a cold frame or a row cover does much the same job, getting seedlings going weeks early and keeping winter salads going with almost no effort.

Starting your own. With a bright windowsill or a small greenhouse, many gardeners start their own tomatoes, squash, and flowers from seed, which is also how the local seed swaps and plant sales keep the good varieties circulating.

WORTH KNOWING

If a greenhouse matters to you, it is worth thinking about when you choose a property: orientation, a level spot with sun, and room to put one up. We flag this when we tour homes with gardeners.

GROW YOUR OWN

Feeding yourself here

If growing your own food is the dream, this is the place for it. The long season means you can put a serious amount on the table, much of it with no cover at all, and more again with a greenhouse.

NO GREENHOUSE NEEDED

In the open, spring to fall. Potatoes, peas, beans, and the whole brassica family, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and kale. Carrots, beets, and parsnips; squash, salad greens, onions, and leeks. Then the berries, strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, and rhubarb, and fruit trees, apple, pear, plum, cherry, even fig.

Right through winter. Kale, chard, collards, leeks, and winter lettuce keep going through the cold months, sweeter after a frost, while carrots, beets, and parsnips can stay in the ground and be pulled as you need them. A simple cloche or row cover is all the help they want.

Planted in the fall. A few crops go in as the season ends and are harvested the next year: garlic in October, broad beans in November, and overwintering onions, all doing their quiet work underground through winter.

WITH A GREENHOUSE OR TUNNEL

More heat, and more months. A greenhouse or polytunnel ripens the heat-lovers that struggle in the open, peppers, eggplant, cucumbers, melons, and basil, and gives tomatoes a reliable crop. It also starts your seedlings weeks early and keeps the winter greens going with almost no fuss.

THE TRICKY BITS

Deer, elk, slugs, and drought

No garden paradise is without its trials. A handful of things every Island gardener learns to plan around, and all of them are manageable.

Deer. The common one. Deer are everywhere, and they will browse a garden to the ground. The answer is good fencing, around two metres, or leaning on the long list of plants deer tend to leave alone.

Elk. Less common, but present in some rural and valley pockets, the Cowichan, around Ladysmith and North Oyster, and the back country near Nanaimo and Port Alberni. Roosevelt elk are far bigger than deer and walk through ordinary fencing, so where a herd roams you need a taller, sturdier fence, closer to three metres. Worth asking about before you buy acreage.

Slugs. The mild, damp climate that grows so much also grows slugs. Most gardeners manage them with traps, barriers, and a bit of evening patrol rather than letting them run the show.

Acidic soil. Island soil tends to be acidic and, in places, rocky or heavy. Raised beds, compost, and a little lime where needed sort most of it out, and the acid lovers like rhododendrons and blueberries are delighted.

Summer drought. The dry summers mean watering, and many communities bring in watering restrictions through the season. Mulch, drip irrigation, and drought-tolerant choices make this a non-issue rather than a chore.

Catch the winter rain. This is where the wet winters turn into an asset. Where summer water runs tight, on a well, on the smaller islands, or under watering restrictions, many gardeners catch the rain that falls all winter, running it off the roof into barrels or a cistern and banking it for the dry months. It is sustainable, it eases the summer pinch, and it buys genuine peace of mind.

WORTH A VISIT

Gardens to wander

Part of the fun of gardening here is the gardens you can visit for ideas, plants, and a good walk.

Milner Gardens and Woodland. The jewel of the mid-Island, a seventy-acre seaside garden in Qualicum Beach run by Vancouver Island University, named one of the ten best public gardens in Canada. It is famous for its rhododendrons, its ancient Douglas firs, and a tea room, and it lights up every December for Milner Christmas Magic.

Rhododendron and species gardens. Milner's Greig Rhododendron Species Garden, a partnership with the Island's rhododendron society chapters, is a destination in spring when the blooms are at their peak.

Nurseries and farther afield. The Island's well-established nurseries and garden centres are worth the browse, and for a bigger day out, the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific near Victoria has gardens to wander an hour and a bit south.

THE COMMUNITY

Clubs, plots, and good company

Gardening here is social. Plugging into a club or a seed swap is one of the fastest ways to learn the local ground and meet people.

Horticultural societies and garden clubs. Nearly every town has one, the Nanaimo Horticultural Society, the Cowichan Valley Garden Club, and clubs in Qualicum, Parksville, Ladysmith and beyond, with speakers, plant sales, and open-garden days.

Community gardens and Master Gardeners. Groups like the Nanaimo Community Gardens Society run plots and workshops, and the Vancouver Island Master Gardeners turn up at events to answer questions for free.

Seedy Saturdays and seed swaps. The Qualicum Beach Seedy Saturday is among the oldest in the country, and seed swaps across the region keep heritage varieties, and friendships, going.

Specialty and beyond. Rhododendron society chapters, native-plant and pollinator groups, fruit-tree projects, lavender farms and u-picks, and a steady run of farmers markets, plus, on the right lot, backyard chickens and bees, where zoning allows.

THE PROPERTY

Finding a place you can grow

This is where being your realtors matters. When gardening is part of the plan, the right property is about more than the house. A few things we look at with you:

Sun and aspect. A south or west-facing yard with strong sun is gold for a vegetable garden or an orchard. Tall conifers are beautiful, but they shade a great deal of ground, so we read the light, not just the lot lines.

Soil, water, and drainage. Whether the soil is workable, whether it drains, and where the water comes from, a well, a creek, or municipal, all shape what is possible and what summer watering will cost.

Room, fencing, and the rules. Lot size for the garden you want, whether it is fenced against deer, and whether the land sits in the Agricultural Land Reserve, which can open up what you do and set some rules around it.

Greenhouses and the long game. A level, sunny spot for a greenhouse, mature fruit trees already established, or simply room to grow into. We point these out, because they are easy to miss and hard to add later.

GET IN TOUCH

Let's find your patch of ground

Tell us what you want to grow and roughly where you're looking, and we'll keep an eye out for the things gardeners care about, sun, soil, water, room, and a spot for a greenhouse, alongside everything else. A call, an email, or grab a time that works for you.

YOUR ISLAND TEAM



Travis Bach

REALTOR®

(250) 619-2517

travis@bachrealestate.ca



Kiel Bach

PREC*

(250) 667-4182

kiel@bachrealestate.ca

Book a 20-minute call, or explore every guide at bachrealestate.ca

The growing's easy here. Let's find you the ground.

PLEASE NOTE

This guide is a general overview to help you plan, not advice for your circumstances. Climate, zones, frost dates, and local rules such as the Agricultural Land Reserve and watering restrictions are approximate and change, so please confirm the latest with the appropriate authorities and gov.bc.ca before you act.