

In 2007, my husband Raul\* and I decided to leave our corporate jobs behind and buy an organic farm. Feeling unfulfilled with the drudgery that comes with sitting behind a desk, day after day, we left the daily grind of California and bought an 18-acre farm in the interior of the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico.

Our plan was to grow our own food, which offered us complete control over what we put in our bodies, and feel like we were giving back as much as we were taking from Mother Earth.

Along with varieties of bamboo from South America and South East Asia, we also planted fruit trees that are native to the tropics, including places like Borneo, Thailand, the Amazon and West Africa.

In 2012, we added goats for both dairy (we're vegetarians) and organic manure for fertilizer, as well as chickens and ducks (for eggs and manure).

In 2014, we started growing cannabis.

Despite the fact that it's not legal to grow marijuana where we live, we made the decision to do this for two reasons: I'd been taking opioids (Vicodin) nonstop since I was 25 for an injury I sustained years earlier, and it looked like legalization for medical use was years away in Puerto Rico — *if at all*.

After having a frank conversation with my primary care doctor, my husband and I felt we had to take matters into our own hands. Although I had been very careful during those 25 years not to develop a dependence on Vicodin (usually by taking half the recommended dosage), I knew I was killing my liver.

My doctor isn't like the others I've had over the years — all of whom pushed [Big Pharma's "addiction in a pill" method](#) to relieving chronic pain. While she couldn't publicly admit to advocating this decision of ours, she's a country doc at heart. During subsequent appointments, she would ask how the plants were doing and when I thought I'd be able to stop taking what she herself dubbed "Big Pharma's poison in a bottle."

Wanting to be as inconspicuous as possible, rather than designate a section of our farm just for growing weed, we placed the pot plants in areas that are difficult to view from the walking paths we use to get from one section of the farm to another.

While security was our primary reason for interplanting, secondarily, by growing the pot near decoy plants — such as kale, mustard greens and tobacco (we don't smoke tobacco) — we were able to reduce insect attacks on the cannabis because the insects prefer the decoy plants over the marijuana.



We interplanted our cannabis among other plants for security and to combat insect attacks.  
(Alejandra Peña Toledo)

We were very conservative that first year. OK, we were very much “deer in headlights,” actually. We had no idea what we were doing. We didn’t know an OG from a Kush, or a Diesel from a Haze; we were confused as to why anyone would intentionally smoke anything that had “hints of skunk,” and what varieties were good for treating chronic pain, so I could write and not fall sleep, or worse, want to party.

A good friend of ours is a licensed organic grower in California. He gave us several seeds of... something. He told us, but we could never remember the name when it was time to research it, and we seemed to forget to remember to ask him whenever we talked with him.

Chalk it up to beginner’s luck that while our first year yielded very little, it was nice weed. Whatever it was, it gave us a mellow high — not enough to make us drowsy or want to invite people over for an impromptu party, either — but fine enough for chilling at home.

The only problem was, “nice” only got me so far. I really needed to be more aggressive about getting off Vicodin, which meant we had to step things up considerably. I needed to know how to treat the pain during the day so I could work. I had to find something I could use as I was getting ready to stop working for the day, but wasn’t yet ready to go to sleep for the night. And also, I needed something I could take to help me sleep through the night without having to wake up and reload.

We needed to have a few varieties going at once. We also had to learn more about growing, because it was obviously far more than stick some seeds in the ground, marvel at them as they got bigger, harvest, cure and smoke.

The more I read, the more I would joke to my husband, “This sure ain’t the herb my brother and his buddies used to smoke.” Back in the day his dealer may have had options to choose from, but it all smelled the same to me, and it all had the same effect on them: They acted really stupid and spent hours laughing about it.

My husband was starting to have difficulty falling asleep at night and, with my pain issues, we decided to give the Money Maker strain a try. It did everything it promised for both of us. He could sleep, and I could sleep through the night without pain waking me up. This, combined with the “nice” stuff we had, meant I could work and sleep pain-free.

So, we did what anyone in our position would do: We created our own varietal we called Phantasm strain, named after one of our goats. Our second harvest gave us more Money Maker, “nice” stuff and Phantasm. It was everything we hoped for out of this perfect marriage.

My husband could now fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer with Money Maker. I was able to discontinue taking Vicodin on a daily basis. At this point, I was only taking it when I’d get a migraine — and only a half a tablet at a time.

My next goal was to learn what could help me with migraines and sinus headaches, so I could tell my doctor I no longer needed any more Vicodin — *ever*.



Cultivating medical marijuana to wean myself off pharmaceuticals and for pain management.  
(Alejandra Peña Toledo)

## Growing Cannabis Year-Round In The Tropics

By the end of 2015, we were getting pretty good at this growing thing. We may only have had one or two plants of each variety we liked, but we had improved our timing: when to plant, when to harvest, and when (and how long) to cure. Pick too soon and it wasn't ready, but pick too late and the leaves were moldy.

We increased our knowledge about soil amendments and we have had success using the following composted mix:

- Organic matter, such as leaves, grass and hay
- Goat manure aged six months
- Chicken manure
- Bat guano we collect from nearby caves

From the above items, we create a soil mix, which is our growing medium for both seedlings and mature plants. Once a week before flowering begins, a [compost tea](#) of water, goat and chicken manure is fed to each plant.

During flowering, bat guano is added to the compost tea for potassium, which aids in flowering.

Growing weed in the tropics differs greatly from growing in temperate climates. While it's true that in Puerto Rico we can grow year-round, we have two issues that epitomize taking two steps forward, three steps back: Endless sunny days followed by unrelenting rain — and possible hurricanes.

The former is our constant reality. Whether it's raining or not, Puerto Rico is hot and humid most of the time and, like other tropical regions, we experience a rainy season and a dry season. Although Puerto Rico isn't as big as, say, Cuba or Hispaniola (the island shared by the Dominican Republic and Haiti), rainy season in one part of the island may not jibe with rainy season in another part. So, when I write about "our rainy season," I'm only referring to my town, which is in the interior of the island. It's often likened to a fishbowl.



Once a week before flowering begins, our compost tea of water, goat and chicken manure is fed to each plant. (Alejandra Peña Toledo)

Some years, our rainy season can fall between January and May. Other years, we're dry during the months it's cold in most of North America, and May through July we couldn't catch a sunny day if we paid for one. And with hurricane season officially beginning in June (even if they don't really get rolling until August), when rainy season starts so late, we get a twofer — nothing but wet and soggy for months, which ends as hurricane season is in full swing.

Even when there isn't a tropical storm or a hurricane brewing, in Puerto Rico it's damp all the time. With humidity ranges between 60 and 99 percent all year, sometimes it's so moist, the walls and floors sweat. We've found in this situation, it's better for us to see what germinates in April, plant in May, and harvest in September or early October, so we're vaping by Halloween.

But just when we think we can predict Mother Nature, she switches things up. The walls and floors are sweating in January, and rain is always close by for the next two to three months. We've found it's best to be on standby, pay close attention to even subtle changes, check for signs of mold early and often, and most of all, practice the art of detachment.



We create a soil mix, which is our growing medium for both seedlings and mature plants.  
(Alejandra Peña Toledo)

## **Indoor Vs. Outdoor Cannabis Growing In Tropical Weather**

In early 2017, we bought a grow tent. Once seeds germinate, we put them in pots under the lights in the grow tent. Once they reach a certain height, some plants are moved outside, while others never leave the confines of the tent.

In the grow tent, we can control for excessively hot days and long stretches of rain, but we don't use a grow tent to control ambient humidity — we just can't. The best we can do is use a fan to circulate the air to reduce the chances of mold growing.

For plants that remain in the grow tent and that have been moved outside, we fertilize weekly with our compost tea.

Both indoor and outdoor growing have their positives and negatives. One negative with a grow tent is the possibility of stunted growth in our cannabis crop. Some of our outdoor plants have exceeded six and a half feet (tall for some growers, short for others) with big, bushy leaves. Prior to adding an expander this year, the tallest our indoor plants have grown was five and a half feet.

We're hoping the expander will give us an extra foot and a half of plant eight. And of course, another negative is power outages — that happens all the time on Puerto Rico — which always need to be factored in.

## Puerto Rico And Cannabis Legalization

It was in 2015 that Puerto Rico legalized medical marijuana. My doctor called me with the big news. At that point, I hadn't yet decided whether I would get my medical marijuana card or not. I couldn't really see the benefit at the time, seeing as we were doing well growing our own. I asked my doctor about it, and she said, "You never know what's going to happen. Besides, this allows you to sample [product] without wasting months hoping it will work for you."

That made sense. The first dispensaries began opening in our capital San Juan in January 2017 to service the 2,000 medical marijuana patients who had registered with the island's health department. The first time I went to one of the dispensaries, I came home with several 3.5g prescription bottles of bud: Hindu Kush, New York City Diesel, Purple OG, Chemdawg, Mango Haze and San Fernando Valley. I liked them all and loved how different each one was from the last.

Over time, I saw the importance of dispensaries as threefold:

1. For experimentation of flower
2. My source for edibles, oils and waxes
3. As a backup in the event of an emergency

Without the luxury of experimenting with various flowers, I'd never have known that Dead Head gives me a nasty headache, New York City Diesel is my go-to for working pain-free, Sky Pilot and Hindu Kush are our two favorite sleep aids (next to Money Maker), and that nothing beats Mango Haze for [migraine relief](#).

For those times when I'm not at home, in my knapsack are various vape pens full of oil to relieve back pain and/or a migraine, and when I need immediate relief from pain, I love dabbing.



With only three days to prepare for Maria's onslaught, we spent that time fortifying our home and protecting our farm animals. (Alejandra Peña Toledo)

## **Back-To-Back Hurricanes In Puerto Rico**

We can usually time our cannabis cultivation so that we're harvesting in late September, but early- to mid-September is too early for us. Although Hurricane Irma — which hit late August, 2017 — wasn't nearly as strong as Hurricane Maria, she still managed to kill several of our pot plants. We underestimated how strong Hurricane Irma would be. Whatever Irma left behind — which wasn't much — we harvested before Maria came along to devastate the entire island of Puerto Rico less than a month later, in mid-September.

With only three-days warning to prepare for Maria's onslaught, we spent that few days fortifying our home and moving our animals to their hurricane shelters underneath the house.

Unsure how long until my dispensary would open for business once again, and knowing we still had to cure what we were able to pick before Maria hit, I purchased enough flower, edibles and oil from the dispensary to carry me through about six weeks.

And it's a good thing I did. The few plants we harvested before Maria must have had minute traces of mold, which we should have been able to catch with a magnifying glass, but we didn't.

After Hurricane Maria dissipated the next day and it was once again safe to go outside, Raul and I assessed the damage to the areas near the house and where the goats live (the chickens and ducks are free-range).

From the house to the gate at the end of the driveway is about 400 feet. It was completely covered in leaves, branches, felled trees and bamboo.

In the days, weeks and months following Maria, Raul and I spent hours each day cleaning the farm. We started with the area around the house, including the driveway.

This took us three or four weeks.

With a chainsaw, Raul cut damaged and fallen trees into manageable pieces. My job was to take all this organic matter and dump it in a central area for composting.

We estimated Hurricane Maria destroyed about 80 percent of our cultivated plants and trees. Currently, the cleanup process is ongoing and will continue for another year.

Power has now been restored to most of the island. However, in the mountains where we live, it has taken longer due to the terrain. Our electricity returned at the end of April, more than six months after Hurricane Maria struck.

We have friends in another section of our town who were informed they would not have power until this coming December, or later.

Obviously, I'm grateful my doctor urged me to get the medical marijuana card as a backup to my cannabis cultivation. Natural disasters aren't just singular events. Apart from having the peace of mind of knowing I had a plenty of weed to get me through until my dispensary reopened, getting us through until our first crop of 2018 is ready to pick has kept me from needing to get back on Vicodin.



The area in front of the house was covered in leaves, branches, felled trees and bamboo. It took us four weeks to clean up. (Alejandra Peña Toledo)

Hurricane Maria has made us look at preparedness in a whole new way. When I got my MMJ card, we had no way of predicting when a category 4 would strike the island.

We also had no way of knowing that by getting my card within the first six months of legalization, I'd be grandfathered in when Puerto Rico decided to limit flower to terminal patients only. (I hope local politicians come to their senses on this. All laws like this do is pander to religiosity and Big Pharma — both of which have a huge presence on the island.)

Of course, I would be happy with oils, edibles and waxes, but without flower, experimenting becomes more time-consuming. Each year we plant more than we did the previous year, but space isn't limitless.

On or around Hurricane Maria's first anniversary, we'll pick our first plants of 2018. We would have started sooner, but like I said, our power wasn't restored for six months.

Although we're fortunate to have generators to use during power outages, the grow tent requires 17 hours of power and we typically only run the generators for eight to 12 hours a day.

I love what I get from my dispensary, but I'm also really looking forward to smoking our own stuff once again.

After all, there's no place like homegrown.

This was published in [Big Buds Magazine](#) in 2018. For obvious reasons I didn't claim it as my own until recently.

