

Full Grown

Collaborating with nature to produce artful furniture that enhances the environment as well as homes is the vocation of this Derbyshire duo

It was in his family garden as a boy that Gavin Munro noticed a bonsai that looked a bit like a chair. In that moment of natural serendipity a seed of an idea was sown and, 25 years later, the Furniture Design graduate founded Full Grown with wife Alice, turning what he calls his 'fascination with the possibilities of nature-led design' into a mission to 'forge a sustainable alternative to traditional furniture-making'.

But how do you actually grow a chair? Essentially, it is akin to organic 3D printing, with young, flexible trees (willow is a favourite) trained around a 'former' (the basic outline of an upside-down seat) and branches grafted together to strengthen the maturing frame – the whole process takes eight to 10 years. This is not fast furniture! It is also not a method without pitfalls – one of the main ones being that you cannot force a tree to become a chair. Instead, the practice is what Gavin refers to as a 'collaboration with nature'. He chooses not to dominate the trees, and the process is more about encouraging them in a certain direction. As Alice adds: 'We see what shape the tree is showing us, and work with that.'

The result is often not perfection (much to the couple's initial displeasure), but something more special. It was a chance encounter with sculptor David Nash that helped them both to accept that a lack of uniformity could be a positive. 'He told me, it's not manufacturing, it's art,' Gavin recalls. Those who have seen Full Grown's chairs, shown by Sarah Myerscough Gallery, would agree. As does MoMA, which bought one for its permanent collection.

Since the first trees were planted in 2008, it has been a learning curve. Formal, vineyard-like rows of planted soon-to-be-chairs have developed into a more supportive ecosystem. The seats are now grown in a small copse, with much thought given to the aphids, caterpillars, bees and birds that are regular visitors (and act as pest control). Via trial, occasional error and perseverance, Alice and Gavin have become experts in this slow, considered method and plan to share aspects of their process with others. 'We envision a network of chair orchards across different ecosystems, growing region-specific designs while respecting local flora,' says Alice. 'Each chair embodies the value of waiting and the rewards of sustainable practices. Our work reminds us that true craftsmanship is worth the time, and offers an antidote to disposable-design culture.' Each totally unique piece, adds Gavin, is 'like an antique from a beautiful future'. *All chairs, price on application, fullgrown.co.uk; sarahmyerscough.com*

