

Published July 4th, 2012

In the Name of the Father...and the Son Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



Surfer Steve stands by his surfboard in a colorful garden room. Photo Jaime Giacomi

charge of the park across from City Hall for the City of Beverly Hills and his father, John Segundo Giacomi, tended the gardens for over 30 years of celebrities like Ed Gardner, American comic actor, writer and director, most remembered as the creator and star of the radio's popular Duffy's Tavern comedy series as well as Leo Carrillo, political cartoonist, and actor best known as Pancho in the 1950s TV series, The Cisco Kid.

As a child, Steve, and his older brother, Giacomo, raked, watered, and mowed lawns as their dad produced horticultural magic. They'd spend their summers in Italy working in their family vineyards and farms riding the oxen while their uncles plowed the fields. "One of my cousins grew olives, cabbages, tomatoes, and onions around the grape vines. We'd drive his fiat under the pergola filling the car with vegetables to dispense the wealth to relatives or trade for cheese with friends up the mountain."

Their childhood Brentwood yard was filled with fruit trees-apples, plums, peaches, avocados, citrus plus exotic plants such as Birds of Paradise and Staghorn ferns, influencing the manner in which Steve designed his Orinda gardens. Steve propagates these mammoth 70-year-old Staghorn ferns and shares them with friends. "They are part of my family and our tradition. Whenever I work with the plants I know my father and brother also touched them and they are touching me."

When he was young, his family and friends gathered regularly in a park to play bocce ball and speak Italian. It's the same when he visits Italy today. Italians love bocce! When he was designing his garden spaces, he knew he had to have a bocce ball court. In order to do that, he had to level a part of the steep hill, build retaining rocks walls, and create paths and stairways to access it.

Steve is a patient gardener. He believes a real gardener allows the garden to evolve and become part of daily life. To him, gardening is not work. It is art, contemplation, exercise, relaxation, and refuge. Whether anyone likes his random outdoor rooms or not is immaterial. He enjoys his assortment of themes, he nurtures each one as a father cherishes a child, and in return, his plants flourish and nurture him.

Wandering his expansive grounds, I am amazed at the tenderness bestowed on every specimen. His numerous trees have been thinned and pruned to allow for ample sunshine framed

"I am not a painter, but in the garden I can be an artist. My yard is my canvas, the plants are my colors and textures." Steve Giacomi

In the early 1930s, many Italians from the tiny town of Ossenigo, 30 kilometers north of Verona, immigrated to Los Angeles. It was the depression, and as the entertainment industry expanded, work as gardeners for former farmers grew. These men were real gardeners, with generations of tilling the soil, sowing, reaping, harvesting, and creating beauty as a life force. They planted their skills in the most prestigious neighborhoods of Beverly Hills, Bel Air, and Brentwood, working for movie stars and moguls, usually working alone, or with the aid of their children.

Orinda resident Steve Giacomi believes that gardening is in his blood. His uncle Frank Malvasio, from Italy's Piedmonte region, was a gardener in

by spectacular western views. Fountains gently gurgle, birdbaths share the spotlight with a pot of succulents, orchids from his brother's divisions spew gargantuan blooms. Staghorn ferns hang from porch rafters, a blue spruce straddles flagstone cracks planted with thyme and isotoma, fluorescent blossomed rhododendrons adorn walkways. His children's former fort has been transformed into a twisted wisteria pergola, paths meander up, down, and all around, and at every turn another surprise awaits. A cement statue of a pig stands guard outside his home office. "That's my Capitalist Pig!" Steve chuckles.

Every corner suggests the generations of garden love and lore that are Steve's heritage. "I'm creating an oak pygmy forest," he laughingly tells me. He "bonsais" hundreds of oak seedlings, allowing their roots to maintain the integrity of the hillside, without blocking views. The stubs resemble stick-thin, tufted haired rock stars. Volunteer trees are carefully pulled out, pygmied, or pruned. Spending an average of two to three hours daily in his lush sanctuary, Steve knows every inch of his fertile property. After 35 years, his Orinda oasis is his home paradise.

Perched against a wall in the rose garden his teenage surfboard reigns, a memory of growing up a California beach boy living near the sea. As the sun sets, and the moon rises above the Oakland hills bathing us in the warm orange glow of dusk, we raise a glass of Pinot Grigio, "To Italy, to our roots, to our Father's gardens."

Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for July

"I should like to enjoy this summer flower by flower, as if it were to be the last one for me."--
Andre Gide

Summer-the most wonderful season of all! July is a beautiful warm month filled with barbecues, marshmallow roasts, running through sprinklers, swim meets, and the first fruits of our labors. Time to pick the apricots, plums, and, if the sunshine has been just right, juicy peaches. Is there anything better than fresh Meyer lemon lemonade or a frosty mint julep with mints from your herb garden? Raise the stars and stripes, watch the fireworks, and march in the parades. To paraphrase Henry James: summer afternoon, summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language!

- GIVE a room the bloom by bringing bouquets of roses into your living spaces.
- SPEND a morning at your local Farmers' Market and load up on veggies and fruits that you are not growing in your garden.
- ORGANIZE a flower power photo scavenger hunt. Give a list of ten blooms in your garden to guests and have them find and photograph them for a prize.
- SAVE water by installing landscape timers that automatically adjust irrigation according to weather conditions.
- MULCH with wood chips or shredded bark to maintain moisture and keep weeds at bay.
- DEADHEAD roses as they wither to promote continuous blooming. Cut back to the fifth leaf.
- BLAST aphids with a strong spray from the hose on any plants that have been invaded. If you see ants on your plants, they are protecting the aphids. Get rid of the ants and you'll also get rid of the aphids.
- FLY a kite with friends and family.
- CLEAR brush, debris, and wood from your house perimeter to keep a fire safe zone.
- TAKE the guess work out of when to plant with the new app from Mother Earth News called When to Plant, compatible with the Apple iPhone, iPod touch and iPad iOS 5.0 or later for \$1.99. More garden apps are available at www.MotherEarthNews.com/apps.
- FILL in empty spaces with containers planted with carefully chosen specimens in a complimentary color palette to the existing landscape. Annuals from nursery cell packs can be planted all summer.
- CUT stamens from Asiatic lilies before bringing them indoors for arrangements. Stamen dust stains.
- IRRIGATE early in the morning for best root absorption and thirst quenching.

- PERUSE bulb catalogues for the varieties of tulips and daffodils that you'll want to buy this fall for November-January planting.
- INSPECT your body for ticks after being outdoors in the garden or hiking. If you have been bitten, see your physician immediately as deer ticks and Lyme disease have been reported in all 48 continental states.
- WAIT to bait yellow jacket traps until the day of your barbecue or picnic. By keeping traps filled, you are actually inviting yellow jackets to the table.
- EMPTY containers with still water to avoid mosquito infestation. Put mosquito fish or DUNKS into your ponds. Wear light-colored clothing outdoors and spray on a repellent containing DEET. If mosquitoes are a bigger problem, contact Vector Control. They provide a free inspection and will add mosquito fish to your ponds. (Any anthropod that transmits diseases via bites falls under Vector Control.)
- CELEBRATE your independence all month long with colorful red, white, and blue annuals planted in containers.

It's summer in our cities and time to play outside. Have a firecracking 4th of July, be safe, and as always...

Happy Gardening to You!

(c)2012
Cynthia Brian
The Goddess Gardener
Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com
www.GoddessGardener.com
925-377-7827

I am available as a speaker, designer, and consultant.

ASK CYNTHIA: Reader Requests

Dear Cynthia:

I have purple wisteria and clematis growing up my arbor. They seem to be doing fine together, blooming at different times. Are they good companions and will this last?

Alice, Lafayette

Dear Alice

The simple answer is "No" and "No"! Wisteria and clematis may work well for a few years together, but eventually (and probably sooner, rather than later) the wisteria will choke the clematis and overtake it. Both specimens are gorgeous when blooming, but the wisteria is the more aggressive. Make sure your arbor is sturdy enough to bear the heavy weight of the gnarling vine as it grows. I have three plants sharing a pergola - wisteria, grapes, and pink bower vine. They have been quite beautiful and compatible for the past eight or nine years, yet I am aware in the end, the wisteria will be the triumphant one.

Enjoy their twists and co-habitation while it lasts. Just know that the marriage isn't forever!
Happy Gardening,
Cynthia

Hi Cynthia,

I love your column and read it whenever I see it. I'm also a forager and trying to convert my front garden to native and edibles. I have plenty of plants/weeds to savor.

Where do you typically find wild arugula?

I've been using miner's lettuce as a fresh green at our Seder table for Passover for many years and, hopefully, have converted a few "store only" folks to trying our abundant wild greens in the East Bay.

Happy gardening!!

Mary Anne W.

Hi Mary Anne W:

I love hearing that people actually read the column and enjoy experimenting. Congrats on being a forager. It's so much fun and there is so much to eat.

I have grown wild mustards, arugula, etc. for many years and they keep reseeding. I suggest you check out Renees garden seeds for their new wild arugula called Wasabi.

<http://www.reneesgarden.com/seeds/seeds-hm/herbsA.htm>

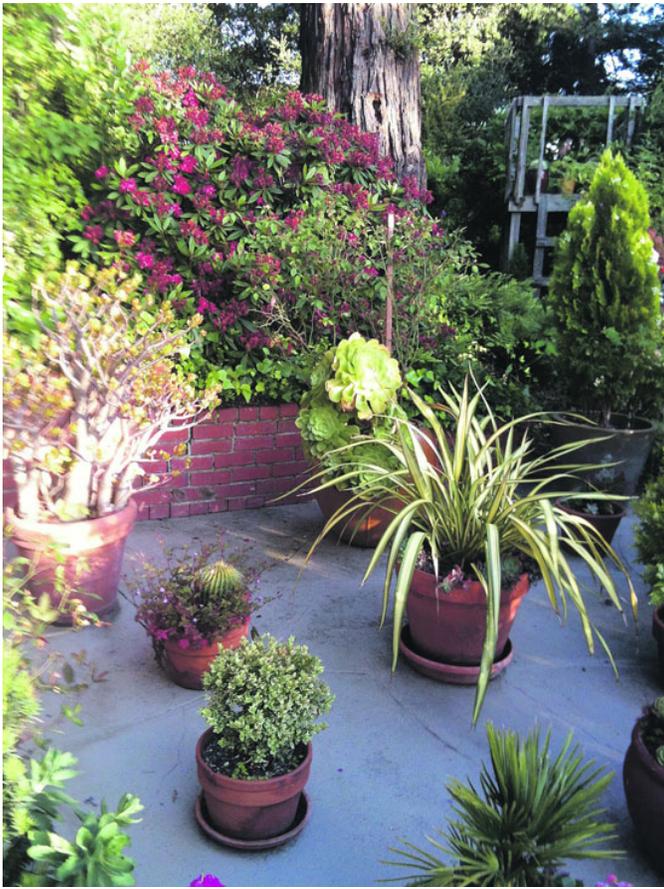
Keep converting those "store only" folks into natural eaters and happy gardening to you as well.

Cynthia

Cynthia Brian

The Goddess Gardener, (c)2012

Cynthia will answer one or two questions per issue as space allows. Email your comments or questions to Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com



Random containers with succulents, palms, and pretties, stand next to the final blooms of a rhododendron with the wisteria fort in the background.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA