

Published March 30th, 2011

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian



Photos Cynthia Brian

and rabbits and a lush harmonized estate of thousands of plantings lovingly sowed. I strolled in wonder through a living painting, stopping to inhale the fragrance, and to photograph the brilliance. I vowed that when I designed my first garden, it would be in tribute to the visions of Giverny and Keukenhof sensibilities.

The acres of poison oak, blackberry bushes, and wild grasses were daunting when I bought land in Lamorinda. My quest for an impressionistic garden was almost thwarted by the unproductive clay soil and the myriad of thistles, weeds, and brush that needed to be cleared before I could begin propagating. While reading a biography of Monet, I noted that he had hauled countless railway wagon-loads of topsoil to his Giverny garden. I followed suit with truck-loads of loam and compost.

With copious amounts of aid from my Dutch and French inspirations, my horticultural passion was two years in the making before my painter's palette beds yielded armloads of flowers in tones of amethyst, rose, sapphire, indigo, vanilla, and pale yellows. How delighted I was to witness my hillsides carpeted in colors carefully chosen for beauty, balance, and bounty!

Then Mother Nature intervened with a reminder that our climate zones differ by cloaking Lamorinda in a fortnight of below freezing weather. By the time the earth thawed, my carefully designed dream had drowned, died, and decomposed. The Dutch bulbs survived the cold becoming the foundation of my masterpiece makeover. Heartbroken yet determined, I underpinned the landscape with a more wild, tousled scene, allowing a rainbow of colors, textures, and plant specimens to frame the undulating fields.

Today my garden boasts mementos from travels to spectacular gardens I have visited around the world. However, my earliest affections for Gaulle and the Low Lands trump the others at this time of renewal. Keukenhof tulips and daffodils in every hue spring to life this season. Monet's iris wave in the wind, wafting their heady perfume my way as I sit in my creek side meditation meadow listening to the gurgling waterfall, the chirping of the nesting songbirds and the croaking toads' mating dance.

Monet planted to paint. I plant to pray. In these stressful days, my garden decompresses the angst. Gardening is my universal language of love and I luxuriate freely in my Lamorinda cultivation. However mediocre, imperfect, untamed, and unruly, it is my personal masterpiece, my slice of heaven.

I join Monet in exclaiming, "What I need most of all in life is flowers, always, always!"

CYNTHIA'S COMPOST COURSE

My garden is a kaleidoscope of colors and fragrance in April and I have my rich compost to thank for that. Keep your kitchen sink clean with my super simple recipe for success to recycle and repurpose your waste.

1. Keep a bowl or small container under your kitchen sink and every time you prepare any food, put all the scraps, except for meat, into the container. This may contain carrot, banana, onion, garlic, and potato peels, lettuce, all vegetables, tea bags, coffee grounds, bread, eggshells, etc.

2. Empty it each day in a five-gallon bucket in your garage, or to a storage area close to the kitchen. Do not leave outside or you'll attract raccoons, skunks, birds, and deer.

3. When the bucket is filled either dump into a pile you have created specifically for composting or use a purchased bin.

4. Add leaves, grass clippings, wood chips, pine needles, straw, spent flower arrangements, blossoms, and any other combination of green or brown organic materials that are not diseased. It's best to have three times as much

Monet's Masterpiece Makeover

"My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece." Claude Monet, 1840-1926, Impressionist painter and life-long gardener

In my youth, when I still considered myself a farmer as opposed to a gardener, I viewed the magnificent oil, "The Artist's Garden in Giverny" painted in 1900 by Claude Monet, now hanging in the Musee d'Orsay in Paris. It was love at first sight, partly because the swathes of purple bearded iris reminded me of my own fields of scented dreams on our farm, and also, because as an apprentice artist, I ached to try my hand at dabbling in dots of light and color.

At the time I was a student living in Holland. April in Lisse, the Netherlands, is breathtaking as a sea of tulips in every color and shape announce the first breath of spring. Wrapped in winter wear, braving the frigid air, I attempted to capture the splendor on canvas. But it wasn't until I arrived in Normandy that the artist in me was reborn as a gardener.

Monet's garden mesmerized me. There were chickens

brown ingredients as green.

5. Turn with a pitchfork. As the weather warms, decomposition occurs.

6. When the mixture is rich, crumbly, filled with worms, and smells like the good earth, spread as organic mulch in your garden where it will leech into the soil to fertilize your plants.

7. Voila! Happy, healthy plants.

PERENNIAL FAVORITES FOR MASTER MAKEOVERS

Daffodil	Ranunculus	Saucer Magnolia	Coreopsis	Bergenia
Tulip	Anemones	Lavender	Hosta	Abelia
Crocus	Agapanthus	Calendula	Ferns	Plumbago
Freesia	Clivia	Ornamental Grasses	Gaillardia	Echinacea
Hyacinth	Kangaroo Paw	Delphinium	Dianthus	Columbine
Muscari	Camellia	Campanula	Dahlia	Digitalis
Dutch Iris	Azalea	Aster	Roses	Artemisia
Bearded Iris	Rhododendron	Agastache	Gladioli	Shasta Daisy
Daphne	Astilbe	Lamium	Jacobinia	Ground Covers

Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide For April

"The richness I achieve comes from Nature, the source of my inspiration." Claude Monet

"April showers bring May flowers," or so the saying goes. It's time to tiptoe through the tulips, even with galoshes and umbrellas to celebrate the sensory spring jewels of crocus, daffodils, muscari, hyacinths, hellebores, tulips, freesias, and other early gems as they carpet our woodlands, hillsides, and personal havens. The secret to beautiful gardens is a gardener who is enthusiastic about digging deep-rain or shine!

- COMPOSE beautiful stoneware container gardens by mixing a combination of cannas, tuberous begonias, oxalis tetraphylla (lovely pink flowers), dahlias, Tinkerbelle agapanthus, and lobelia.
- CAPTURE a photo of your garden with you in it and send it to us for possible publication subject to editorial approval. We want to showcase your creativity. Email high quality jpegs to Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com.
- CLEAN out perennial beds now and prepare the soil for replanting.
- MULCH plants with organic compost. Wood barks are great for a top cover, but rob nitrogen from the soil as they decay.
- START seeds as soon as the soil is warm enough. If you are anxious, start your crops indoors near a south-facing window or use a fluorescent light for 12 or more hours per day.
- WELCOME the migrating birds home with fresh water in the fountain and seed in the feeder.
- PRUNE wisteria and other woody specimens before they leaf out to promote flowering.
- PLANT edibles amongst your ornamentals. Lettuces, parsley, dill, and basil are pretty as well as delicious.
- GROW your own personal bouquets. Create a stunning arrangement of a variety of daffodils and calla lilies and add sprigs of flowering herbs such as rosemary with its deep blue florets.
- DIG out and replace older woody lavender bushes. Lavender thrives for about 5 or 6 years then is ready for the compost pile.
- FLOAT camellias for an attractive conversation, stimulating centerpiece at a dinner party. Continue to pick up any camellia blossoms that have fallen to the ground to maintain the vigor of the bush.
- ADJUST your lawn mower to a higher setting and allow the clippings to nourish the soil.
- DON'T cut grass when it's wet as it breaks the delicate blades and compacts the soil.
- PROTECT your sewer lines by composting your food scraps as opposed to using the garbage disposal. Your garden and your pipes will thank you.
- BEE friendly by planting three or four types of native wild flowers to attract the honey gatherers as well as pest resistant varieties of flowers, shrubs, trees and vegetables, thus eliminating pesticides.
- LOVE caterpillar larvae as part of the natural food chain attracting birds. Plant host plants for the butterflies such as milkweed and dogwood. Leave a patch of dense vegetation for protection from inclement weather and a small mud puddle to quench their thirst.

- PARTICPATE in any of the spring flower events in our area
 - DECORATE for Easter with fresh eggs from geese, chickens, and ducks. With their natural loveliness, no food coloring is necessary.
 - HAUL heavy rocks and flats of flowers by investing in a good wheelbarrow, cart, or even a Red Flyer wagon.
 - EXPLORE our local hiking and biking trails for a whiff of springtime wild flowers.
 - EXPERIMENT with new plantings and unusual varieties by visiting Lamorinda garden centers and talking with the garden experts.
 - EXPERIENCE the bliss of living green and growing memories.
- Welcome to spring. May you and your family enjoy a sunny bunny day in your personal Monet's masterpiece makeover.
Happy Gardening to You!

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Cynthia Brian

The Goddess Gardener

Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com

www.GoddessGardener.com

925-377-7827

My virtual door is always open. I am available as a speaker and consultant. Feel free to contact me.



A spectacular spring selection of daffodils mingle with long stemmed blue blooming rosemary, a bee's favorite friend.
Photos Cynthia Brian

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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