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In the Back Yard

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian-Holiday Magic

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"If you don't make magic, magic doesn't happen." Cynthia Brian



Photo Cynthia Brian

Miracles, mystery, and magic abound as the chill of winter ushers in the season of repose.

December is a month to enjoy the living structures of the winter garden as we search for Rudolph's red nose shining in the night sky. Whether we celebrate Christmas, Hannukah, or Kwanzaa, joy, delight, and merry making is the protocol of the moment.

When the festivities of the holidays begin to exhaust your spirit, respite awaits you in the garden. Breathe in the crispness of the cool air, thrill to the colors of the pomegranates and persimmons, delight in the smells of the evergreens and musky scents of the moss. Take a walk through your yard to examine the bones of your beds.

Is it time to contemplate a re-design of your landscape? Do you want to add more vines, ground covers, trees, or trellises? Would garden ornaments, birdbaths, stone benches, fountains, or arbors add comfort, glamour, and cheer to the gloom? The quiet interval of winter is the perfect occasion to learn the limitations of your landscaping, dream of the bounty, and plan for the reawakening of spring. An artful combination of plants and hardscape will create the framework for another year of collaboration between you and Mother Nature.

Do you believe in magic?

When I was a little girl, magic was abundantly evident. My family has always celebrated everything. Because our farm was somewhat isolated, the family traditions that our parents created were the mainstay of my childhood.

As in many households, the Christmas tree was cut the day after Thanksgiving, thus beginning the holiday season. We placed the tree in a barrel of water for twenty-four hours ensuring that the tree would have a deep drink before it became the centerpiece of our living room. For the remainder of the weekend we decorated an acre of land with Christmas glitter and glitz. We be-

lieved that Santa would never find our obscure ranch unless we were illuminated like Disneyland. Every bush, plant, tree was adorned with lights, animated sculptures, and ornaments. The fields, vineyards, and gardens were beginning their winter nap as our favorite season of lights, love, and laughter awoke.

A path of poinsettias pointed the way to the front door alongside bright cheery cyclamen and red blooming azaleas. Our wreaths and garlands were created using evergreens, twigs, dried weeds, cotoneaster, and pinecones from our gardens. Homemade strands of cranberries and popcorn were strung on the tree alongside our ubiquitous hand crafted children's decorations. What a delight to be a child in the month of December!

After a rainy day, we'd take our straw baskets out to the horse pasture where we'd gather Portobello and "pinkie" mushrooms to be sautéed with garlic, parsley, and wine for our evening meal. Picking mushrooms was a highlight of our Italian upbringing until an acquaintance died from eating poison "fungi's". We no longer forage for mushrooms and recommend that you buy mushrooms from the store. Even the experts cannot always identify edibles from poisonous.

This year it only took a few days of heavy rains for my lawn to sprout several varieties of beautiful deadly mushrooms. My pleasure was in photographing instead of eating them, although I must admit magical memories of my childhood gathering parties were peaked. Unlike most gifts from our gardens, even one button can be fatal. The gratification is not worth the risk so make sure to inform your children not to touch or play with these mysterious wonders of the earth.

Christmas morning, we didn't always get the gifts on our lists to Santa. Of course, we'd be disappointed. Later in the day, Dad would suggest we take a jeep ride around the ranch to see if anything

had fallen off the sleigh and Mom would make sure we strolled through the garden to check for the mistakes of elves. Sure enough! Down at a barn or dangling in a grapevine, a walnut tree, or a favorite rhododendron would be that special present. Once, a bicycle was sticking out of the chimney with a note attached: "Sorry, it wouldn't squeeze down."



Poinsettia

Photo Cynthia Brian

With the economic chaos of Wall Street depression, many of us feel that we live in an un-magical world. Although it is challenging to feel up in down times, we can predict our future by creating our own magic. My garden offers me eternal optimism as each day I witness the circle of nature and the cycle of life. Find ways to reinterpret your daily routine through the eyes of a child. Children give us a second chance to view the world with innocence and credulity. What magic is hiding in your garden? What simple things can become magical experiences if you use a little imagination? Believe in magic and magic will happen.

"Whatever you do or dream, you can begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin now." Goethe, poet and dramatist

HAPPY GARDENING TO YOU!



Cynthia Brian

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co-author, Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul

CYNTHIA'S DIGGING DEEP GARDENING GUIDE FOR DECEMBER

Children all around the world wait 11 months for this month! With all the excitement going on inside, it is hard to think about going outside. For gifts, why not make wreaths from your garden or vinegars using home grown herbs! Rosemary boasts its blue flower, looking and smelling delightful on a gift basket. What a fun opportunity to discover the final surprises of the season in our gardens!

- PROTECT your tender plants from frost and freeze. Move tender potted plants inside or under a patio roof. well-watered plants suffer less damage than those that are stressed from drought conditions.
- RAKE remaining leaves and put all non-diseased leaves into a compost pile.
- MULCH with a blanket of your own compost or buy high quality mulches to protect your garden from the freezes that occur in winter.
- BULBS that you've kept in the refrigerator need to be put in the ground now. Make sure to plant the pointed side up, with the rounded side down! They will root and bloom soon.
- PRUNE dormant fruit trees and shrubs. Fruit trimmings make excellent wood for barbecuing and smoking meats.
- CUT greenery to display in your house. Make wreaths and garlands for your front door. Evergreens including pine, fir, redwood, and cedar are gorgeous as are the large sturdy leaves of magnolia. Other great choices are boxwood, holly, privet, or juniper.
- BUY colorful camellias which are stocked in nurseries now You are sure to find appropriate candidates for the holidays.
- CUT BACK your chrysanthemums to about 6 inches above the ground. • REMOVE dead foliage from plants, tidy the yard and fill your compost bin.
- LEAVE grass clippings on your lawn for free food from Mother Nature.
- CONTROL peach leaf curl by spraying a dormant concoction of fixed copper or lime sulfur after all the leaves have fallen from your trees. You'll repeat this process in January and February.
- PLANT seedlings of lily of the valley, oriental poppies, peony, and calendula in anticipation of springtime blooms.
- PICK pomegranates, persimmons, and tangerines for holiday décor and delicious, nutritious treats.
- BAREROOT plants such as grapes, berries, artichoke, asparagus, and rhubarb are ready to be planted.
- SET out bird houses for birds. Although it's too early for nesting, birds will use the boxes as protection against predators and the elements.
- FEED your birds all winter long and you'll be rewarded with a healthy garden as well as the song of angels.
- DEADHEAD your roses one last time for a final flush of holiday blossoms. Next month you'll perform your heavy pruning.
- CHECK for freshness when buying a Christmas tree by gently grasping a branch and tugging. When the tree is fresh, the needles will not break off. If it's getting dry, you'll have a handful of needles.
- DO NOT eat the mushrooms growing in your garden. In Italy and France you could bring them to a "farmacia" for identification. Don't take the risk here in California.
- ADORN your Christmas tree with fresh pink pistache berries, cotoneaster, and baby pinecones.
- VISIT the Be the Star You Are!® charity booth at the Season of Lights Celebration on December 6 at both the Rheem Shopping Center and the Moraga Shopping Center for FREE holiday plantings and pots.
- ENJOY the drama, textures, and color of your deciduous trees.
- CREATE magic in your garden and your life.

From my gardens to yours, may your holidays be healthy, wealthy, merry and magical with the love and good cheer of family and friends.

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