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Digging Deep-Gardening with Cynthia-WINTER WEARY WONDERLAND!

**What is paradise but a garden, an orchard of trees and herbs full of pleasure and nothing there but delights?" William Lawson*

By Cynthia Brian





Cynthia Brian

It had been a really horrible winter. Rainy, cold, gray, and depressing. We were outdoor kids and had spent too many days inside. The first rainless day in March, my sisters and I decided to run away from home. We told Mom and Dad about our plans to go find sunshine and happiness. With a chuckle, they asked if we needed help packing. "No," we responded, "we're old enough to pack our wagon ourselves." We were three, four, and five years old respectively, living on a big ranch far from the madding crowd. Our grandparents had bought us this red Radio Flyer with removable wooden sides for Christmas, and we were eager to escape.

The packing began. We included all of life's essentials: our dolls, toy cash register, dinosaurs, pogo sticks, jump ropes, play phone, puzzles, picture books, miniature tool set, stuffed animals, hula hoops, Monopoly money, rock collections, roller skates, a plastic shovel, and our battered shared tricycle, which was tied to the back of the wagon. Items like food, water, clothing, and blankets never crossed our minds.

Excitedly, we kissed our parents good-bye and told them we were off to wonderland. They acted as if running away was a common occurrence and wished us a safe and happy journey. Mom handed us a sack of sandwiches she had packed, and Dad suggested we take along our dog Bullet (named after Roy Rogers and Dale Evans's dog) to protect us. With our cowboy hats on our heads, our holsters on our hips, and our stick horses as our mode of travel, we started off, singing "Happy Trails to You" as we pulled our heavy load.

Suddenly we saw heaven ahead. Mustard-tall yellow spires blanketing the fields-beckoned us to come play. Breaking into a run, we dashed toward this beacon of springtime. The mustard plants were taller than any of us. We could stand and not be seen by each other a few feet away. "This is it!" we exclaimed.

"Let's set up house!" As we unpacked our valuables, we stomped around in the mustard making rooms for each of us and putting everything in a special place. "This is the kitchen, this is the porch, this is the living room, this is the bedroom, this is the garage." We lay down in the mustard and rolled around, inhaling the pungent fragrance of this intoxicating plant.

Bullet found squirrels to chase and barked with enthusiasm. The sounds of rushing water filled the air and we wandered over to the creek. There we found miners' lettuce, dandelions, wild strawberries, and watercress growing. Pretending we were pioneers, we made a salad using our dolls' utensils and settled in for our first meal together. We thought it was absolutely delicious! Our shoes came off, and we waded into the water but it was too cold to think of swimming or catching polliwogs. We quickly decided that throwing rocks would be more fun. Lots of wildflowers-shooting stars, lupines, and poppies-adorned the banks, and we picked big bouquets for our new home in the mustard fields.

The rest of the day was spent playing hide-and-seek in the mustard, arranging and rearranging our treasures, and hunting for new rocks. Time sped by, and before long it was dark. The moon came up, and the night sounds sent shivers down our backs. None of us dared show fear. The coyotes howled, the owls hooted, and Bullet barked at night-foraging rabbits. At first we had retreated to our separate mustard bedrooms, but soon the three of us curled up together and counted the stars while Bullet was posted as sentry. We decided that this was the happiest day of our lives, but we wondered if Mom and Dad missed us.

None of us were awake when Dad came to get his girls. We woke up in our own beds in the morning, the smell of Mom's cooking wafting from the kitchen. At breakfast we all agreed we had indeed found the Promised Land far, far away, and we shared stories of our thrilling adventure with our parents who listened with rapt attention. We didn't realize that our enchanted faraway world was only a mile down the road, on our own property. We had never left the ranch.

There truly is no place like home.

March is the miraculous month when we weary of winter and search for the signs of spring. Although February provided many days of solid rain, this year in California we pray for more to assure us a drought-free summer.

I am just this day returning from a lecture tour throughout the Caribbean where the sun shone brightly, bronzing my skin and my emotions. The azure warm sea satisfied my senses as I snorkeled amidst underwater gardens. The swaying

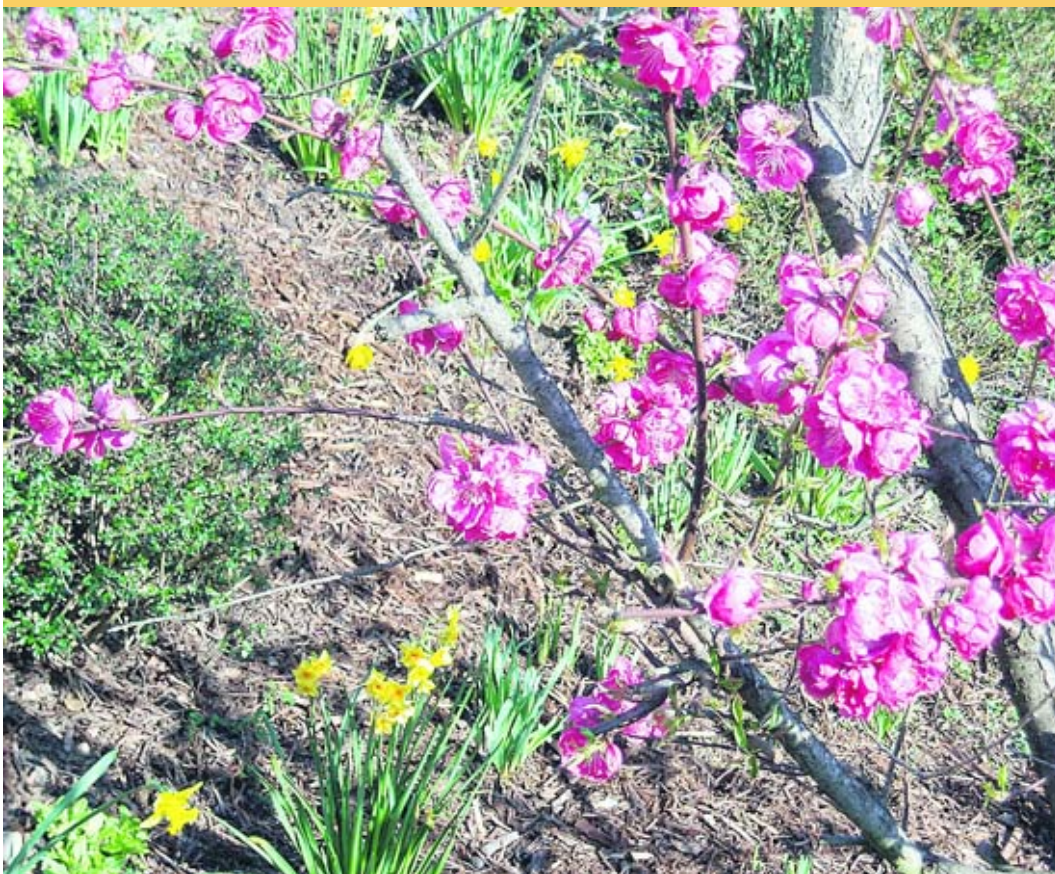
palms on the beach beckoned me to wander deeper into the lush landscapes where I photographed flowers, trees, and cottages , breathing deeply from the essence of life. Once again, I was that little girl experiencing paradise, or the Promised Land.

Just as quickly as my escape had begun, it was time to return. Thankfully, the cheerful wild mustard blanketing the hillsides and the singing daffodils greeted my arrival as they trumpet a new birth. Flowering peach, plum, and pear trees perfume the heavens and my personal orchard. How I appreciate the emerald hillsides in anticipation of the vernal equinox.

Welcome to Lamorinda! There is no place like our home.



yellow mustard Photo Cynthia Brian



flowering peach tree Photo Cynthia Brian

Cynthia's Digging Deep Gardening Guide for March

"He who wants to eat a good supper should eat a weed of every kind."

Italian proverb

March heralds weeds to eat! On a trail near you, you'll find fresh crunchy Miner's lettuce, pungent mustard, creek watercress, dandelion, and wild strawberries. Take photographs to determine if any of these wild delicacies are growing in your garden. If so, toss a spring salad of edible weeds and enjoy my childhood indulgence! We are gearing up for spring and there is more work now that spring has almost sprung. Aren't you excited?

- PREPARE your soil for the upcoming spring planting utilizing your new compost materials. You did start a compost pile or bin since reading my last column, didn't you?

- COMPOST all your organic materials as explained in last month's column.

Remember,

you may add your coffee beans, tea leaves, vegetable peelings, shredded newspaper, leaves, grass clippings, woodchips, chicken manure, and non-diseased weeds to your compost bin.

- CHECK your oak trees for the pesky oak moth larvae. The caterpillars are quite beautiful with black and yellow markings. If you think you have Monarch butterflies, think again.

Call in the pros unless you like bald trees.

- MOW your lawns weekly. We didn't have much to do with lawns in the winter but with

the increased light and warmer days, our grasses are growing rapidly.

Think of mowing as exercise!

- FEED you lawns with high-nitrogen fertilizer and pull any noticeable weeds.

(If they are dandelions, they ARE edible as long as you haven't sprayed with a toxic material).

- SOD or SEED now when the weather is dry. If seeding, you may need to cover your lawn

with netting as our flying friends, the birds, truly enjoy feasting on newly planted

lawns.

- **FERTILIZE** this month. The winter rains have drained the soils of needed nutrients. It's up to you to feed all plants including fruit trees, annuals, roses, and shrubs. Mature trees need their nitrogen booster. Wait to fertilize rhododendrons and camellias with an acid fertilizer until next month when they are finished blooming.

- **DIVIDE** perennials such as phlox, day lilies, agapanthus, and yarrow. Give to friends or find a new space in your place.

- **PEST ALERT** for the creepy crawlies this month as the weather warms. Use a hose to spray aphids or a spray gun with a little household detergent. Vigilance is necessary with the slugs, snails, and earwigs that munch on the new sprouts.

- **NETTING** is a must to keep birds and small animals from eating your newly planted vegetables or color spots.

- **MULCH** to conserve moisture for the summer drought. We didn't really get enough rain this year to lower our water bills, so make sure to place three to four inches of mulch in your garden. When July arrives, you'll be able to afford that extra hose!

- **REMOVE** camellia blossoms that fall to the ground as the spent blooms are not good for the mother plant. Add to your compost pile.

- **VEGETABLE** planting time is here for potatoes, herbs, beets, peas and carrots, peppers, and eggplant. I love broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower and there is still time to grow these edibles which may help prevent cancer.

- **CHOOSE** bulbs for your summer satisfaction including begonias, dahlias, gladiolus, watsonia, and callas.





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