

In the Back Yard • Digging Deep—Talking Dirt: Gardening with Cynthia “Gardener’s do it in the dirt.”

By Cynthia Brian



Cynthia Brian

I love dirt. Mother Nature produces good earth and as a gardener, soil is my sandbox. It's that glorious time of year when I catch the dirt disease. The weather is warming, our formerly green hills are turning California gold, and my dirt dries into tanned cement. Before the heat hits, you'll find me mulching, composting, tilling, and amending my backyard soil. Are you talking dirt, too?

Hopefully, before you began your spring bed plantings and your vegetable garden, you enriched your soil with the composted grass clippings, leaves, vegetable scraps, coffee grinds, and tree prunings that you've been tossing in your Biostack. If you are installing a new landscape in a newly built home where the ground has been bulldozed, you'll need to bring in a truckload or more of topsoil before you begin your summer beds. For the rest of us, create a great foundation for our gardens by getting intimate with your dirt. Frankline D. Roosevelt said, "The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself." As gardeners, we have an opportunity to replenish and nourish our planet. By designing healthy soils we create the best groundwork for the

growth of our gardens, which will improve the health and beauty of our plants and moreover, ourselves.

Get to know your soil. Is your soil sandy, loamy, or clay like most of the ground in Lamorinda? An easy experiment is to combine two cups of your garden dirt with water and a teaspoon of liquid detergent in a quart size jar. (A clean, recycled mayonnaise jar is perfect.) Let the jar sit undisturbed for twenty-four hours until you can easily distinguish the layers of solid materials. This will give you a good approximation of the amount of silt, clay, pebbles, or sand in your soil. Once you know the ingredients of your dirt, you can prepare the necessary recipe to enrich it.

Feed your soil. Since antiquity, gardeners have used organic conditioners to alter the physical properties and the structure of their soil. The point is to enhance the fitness of the dirt so that plants will grow more healthily. Soil amendments, when applied correctly, create happy environments for the roots and for beneficial organisms. Conditioners aerate and assist with absorption and drainage. Make sure to use your Biostack to create your own earthy smelling and nutritious compost. (See Digging Deep, February 2009, <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0224/Digging-Deep-Failure-Flowers-and-February.html>)

Mulching is magical. If you really want to conserve water and save on your EBMUD bill, add a blanket of mulch matter around your plants. In the summer, mulch keeps roots cool and helps control water run-off, in the winter, it keeps plants from freezing. Over time, mulch decomposes which adds more organic matter to enrich your soil. Numer-



Photos Cynthia Brian



ous options are available including straw, shredded bark, and wood chips, and some of them are completely free.

If you want a sustainable garden, you have to get dirty. Rich, healthy soil is the key to growing everything in abundance. My girlfriend, Jill, has a ranch on Dry Creek Road near Healdsburg. Because she gardens by the river with all its luscious loam, she has vegetables and flowers the size of Alaska. I must admit, no matter how much I tend to my dirt, in our neck of the woods, I

have to vigilantly keep my wheelbarrows moving the muck. It's worth the extra effort. My garden is filled with worms, bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, ladybugs, frogs, lizards, snakes, golden finches, and a plethora of friendly bug hungry critters. No wonder my roses, rhododendrons, ranunculus, and rosemary are resplendent!

We're all dirt gardeners. Stand tall and be proud. Keep digging deep and do the dirt!

Happy Gardening to You!

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Cynthia is available as a speaker, writer, and host of your events. Call 925-377-STAR for fee schedule and to book Cynthia.

SAVE THE DATE for Sept. 13, 2009 from 4-9pm for the BOOKS AND BANDS BASH with Dancing Under the Stars benefiting Be the Star You Are! charity. This is the launch party for Cynthia's newest book, Be the Star You Are! for TEENS. Many local teens are being published. All tickets sold in advance via PAYPAL, check, or credit card. Tickets only \$13 for the event; \$27 for a book and the ticket; \$20 for book only. Visit www.bethestaryouare.org to order today.



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Cynthia's Digging Deep Garden Guide for June

"Gardens are not made by singing 'Oh, how beautiful!' and sitting in the shade." Rudyard Kipling

A garden is never finished. My garden reminds me of the Sagrada Familia Cathedral designed by Gaudi in Barcelona, Spain which has been under construction since 1882. Just as I think I have everything under control, a sprinkler breaks, or the night-scaping lights go out. There is always work to be done in our garden cathedrals and summer is the busiest time of all. Put on your gloves and hate, grab your trowel and your pruners, and let's have some fun. We're digging deep.

- KNOW your soil by using tips from this month's column.
- ROTATE your crops from last year's position when planting your vegetable patch.
- PLANT corn, cucumbers, squash, beets and Swiss chard as well as several herbs such as basil, chives, cilantro, marjoram, thyme, and lavender.
- RAKE with an iron tine rake any fern rhizomes that are overtaking your garden. Ferns like slightly acid soil rich with humus.
- ABODES for toads can be made out of broken clay pots turned upside-down. The toads spend the warm, sunny days under their cool home, patrolling for insects at night.
- SHOWER your houseplants under the sprinklers while watering your outdoor plants. They'll enjoy a few hours of sunshine.
- DISCOURAGE our dear deer and ravishing rabbits by tying colorful scraps of fabric to their favorite edibles.
- ELIMINATE PESTS by spraying plants with a garden hose using a hard stream of water. Make sure to spray both sides of the leaves.
- CHECK your nursery for the latest varieties of summer annuals. You'll find a great selection of snapdragons, lobelia, marigolds, and zinnias this month.
- CONCOCT this prescription for organic bug control. In a blender pulverize 6 tablespoons red peppers, 3 cloves garlic, 2 onions. Strain through a cheesecloth. Dilute 50/50 with water and spray on pests. Add a little detergent to make the solution stick to the leaves.
- CONTROL powdery mildew showing up on roses, apples, begonias, zinnia, and crape myrtle by thinning the branches for better air circulation. Refrain from watering late in the day.
- FERTILIZE annuals and vegetables with an organic formula.
- PLANT warm weather lawns such as Bermuda.
- SAVE water by watering early in the morning. Water deeply and less frequently avoiding run off.
- CLEAN your drip system and fix any broken or leaky irrigation pipes.
- DEEP SOAK your magnolia and fruit trees with a deep soaker during the hottest weather.
- CUTTINGS of azaleas, fuchsias, hydrangeas, chrysanthemums, geraniums, pelargoniums, and carnations will propagate if sown now.
- PINCH buds for more blossoms later.
- COVER your fruit trees with netting as the delicious apricots, peaches, cherries, loquats, and plums will be devoured by hungry birds.
- WEED and hoe before old weeds send out new seeds.
- FEED your birds. You've taken care of our feathered friends all winter, now it's time to enjoy their antics.
- COMPOST by saving your scraps, clippings, leaves, and other organic matter to stimulate microbial activity to limit nematode populations.
- FIRE up a portable fire pit for those cooler June nights. Make sure to keep the lid on to prevent the flames from reaching other materials.
- INHALE natural aromatherapy with fragrant pots of herbs.
- INSTALL a moveable barbecue garden by putting containers of rosemary, thyme, cilantro, and peppers in a wagon.
- HANG an inexpensive or refurbished chandelier under your patio overhang to create an elegant outdoor dining room.
- SHARE volunteer plants and cuttings with friends and neighbors to create your unique cutting garden.
- SAVE water by using your dishwasher to quench the thirst of outdoor potted plants.
- DEADHEAD your roses to stimulate continuous blooming throughout the year.
- CREATE an edible floral arrangement from the branches of fruit trees or flowering plants and place on your kitchen counter for easy plucking.
- GRAB a glass of your favorite beverage, sit in your favorite chair, watch the sunset, and sing "Oh how beautiful!"



Thank you to all of you who email me with your complimentary feedback. I appreciate that you actually read Digging Deep and are out there in the garden getting dirty. My virtual garden gate is always open.

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