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Gardening with Cynthia Brian: Care, Share and Be Fair

By Cynthia Brian



Close up of the rose peach petals Photo Cynthia Brian

you a bouquet to cheer you up. These are for you, " I pleaded, as only an innocent can, while my mother's eyes sadly surveyed her beautiful petals littering the bricks. "Come with me, young lady," my mom ordered. "Today you get a gardening lesson."

And with that admonition, Bullet and I became gardeners. Instead of a spanking, mom walked us around her expansive grounds sharing names of the plants, growing habits, and flowering schedules, all the while explaining that it was disrespectful to the gardener to harvest blooms without an invitation. It wasn't long after this incident that my parents bestowed each of their children with a small plot of land that we could call our own. "Plant what you will and pick what you want," was the message. It was a bit like Beatrix Potter's Mrs. Rabbit warning her precious bunnies, "Now, my dears, you may go into the fields or down the lane, but don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden!"

Once Bullet and I had our very own garden, we didn't like anyone picking our flowers or vegetables either. The garden became our sanctuary-our special place where we could just be, dig, play, and enjoy the smells of the earth while watching the insects, worms, and occasional gopher or snake. We worked hard in that space and we most definitely felt it was ours. Bullet guarded it as if he was a three hundred pound beast instead of the thirty-pound mutt he was. No one was allowed to pluck without consent lest they confront his wrath.

Of all the emails and letters I receive, one overwhelming theme arrives from frustrated homeowners asking what they can do to keep intruders from pilfering their flowers, fruits, and vegetables. I empathize with their sentiments. There have been workmen who took every one of my oranges and lemons when they thought I wasn't looking, stuffing big bags in their trucks. "Excuse me, what are you doing?" I've asked, "These are my precious citrus!" I've endured numerous responses, including "well, they were just hanging on the tree. We didn't think you wanted them," to "lemons are so expensive in the stores, and we love fresh fruit." I've had walkers pinch a bountiful bouquet of my tantalizing tulips thinking I was the hired help while commenting to me "why should I buy a spray when there are so many right here!" What are they thinking...or not thinking?

No matter what our intentions, how big a garden is, or how many varieties of flowers, fruits, vegetables, and herbs are growing in the area, we always must respect private property. Even in a poor economy, purloining someone else's goods is stealing...pure and simple.

Today as I pick my camellias and I inhale the scent of the aromatic Daphne, I am grateful for my March gardening lesson so many moons ago. A garden is to grow and a garden is to share, yet we must always remember that a garden requires a hard working gardener to flourish.

As you enjoy the plethora of yellow daffodils, blossoming plums, ripe Meyer lemons, and flowering quince, make sure to ask before you help yourself to a clipping, a snippet, or a bag. Gardeners are enterprising generous folks and they may be saving those special specimens for a special occasion. By politely requesting, most likely you'll be given a sampling because gardeners enjoy planting happiness. Gardeners also know that the best things to come out of the garden are gifts for others. Don't be a thief. Care, share, and be fair.

The day I became a gardener was the first sunny day in the month of March. My dog, Bullet (yes, named after Roy Roger's and Dale Evan's Hollywood hound) and I went for a stroll in my mother's prized garden with the intent of picking her a beautiful bouquet. Not a great idea.

It was the intoxicating fragrance of the blooming Daphne that led me down this garden path. The glossy leaves with the abundant purple-throated flowers on the outside with the flush of pink inside and the scent of a Goddess were irresistible to my six year-old paws. After pinching as many blossoms as I could hold, I moved on to the deep pink camellias. How excited I was to arrange such a lovely bouquet! Of course, in my earnest efforts to choose the best blooms, I had also discarded numerous buds unworthy of my magnificent mom.

That's when we heard the screeching scream and the formidable footsteps. "Cynthia, if I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times not to pick flowers from the garden without asking," my mom yelled as she ran towards me. With teeth barred, Bullet posed his protection, growling like a mountain lion. No one, including my momma was going to intercept his mistress, me. "Mom, but I'm picking



Flowering peach tree blossoms against the clear blue sky Photo Cynthia Brian



Lenten Rose - the true harbinger of spring Photo Cynthia Brian



Watering can framed by pixie orange-throated yellow daffodils Photo Cynthia Brian



Bergenia (aka Elephant Ears) Photo Cynthia Brian

Cynthia's Digging Deep Gardening Guide for March

"Keep a green tree in your heart

and perhaps the singing bird will come." Chinese proverb

As the temperature warms, we begin to feel the stirrings of spring. It's time to get out the hoe and start preparing the soil for the plantings to come. Spade and till, add organic amendments and compost. Fruit trees erupt into bloom this month perfuming the wind while daffodils, bergenia, crocus, and tulip trees provide a patchwork quilt of provocative color. Breathe in the fresh air of the birth of the natural cycle.

- LAWNS are ready to be mowed regularly now. Feed with high-nitrogen fertilizer. Once the weather is dry, seed or sod new lawns. Pull any weeds, making sure to get the roots. To control crabgrass and broad-leaved weeds, visit your local garden center for organic sprays. Always pay careful attention to the labels.
- LOOKOUT for oak moth larvae on your oak trees. If you notice large masses of green droppings on the ground, call in the professionals.
- FEED rose bushes alfalfa pellets mixed with diatomaceous earth to keep roses healthy throughout the season.
- FERTILIZE fruit trees, annuals, shrubs, and mature trees with a solution high in nitrogen. Wait to fertilize rhododendrons and camellias with an acid fertilizer until next month and then when they are finished blooming.
- COMPOST your grass clippings, leaves, vegetable scraps, newspaper, and other organic matter. Do not put any diseased plants or weeds into your pile.
- DIVIDE perennials including day lilies, agapanthus, yarrow, and phlox while they are semi—dormant. Share and replant healthy pieces after division.
- PLANT beets, peas, carrots, lettuces, potatoes, onions, and herbs.
- PICK slugs, snails, and earwigs off your plants or put out saucers of beer encouraging their drunken suicides.
- PROTECT your garden from deer and cottontails by netting plants that you don't want nibbled.
- FLOAT camellias in a glass bowl with sprigs of Daphne for indoor beauty and fragrance.
- BULBS. Your summer will be more beautiful when you take the time to plant warm weather bulbs now. Choices include begonias, dahlias, gladiolus, watsonia, and callas.
- PRUNE your pelargoniums and geraniums for fuller summer blooms.
- ATTEND the San Francisco Flower and Garden Show March 24-28 at the San Mateo Event Center for four acres of inspiring full-sized gardens, seventy seminars and workshops plus over 250 vendors all for only \$16. Tickets are available at Bay Area nurseries or online at www.sfgardenshow.com.
- REFRAIN from "borrowing" a bloom or a bulb. Ask before you take a sample.
- SHARE a bouquet of Dutch iris, daffodils, and tulips. Savor the delight your gift from the garden brings to others.

Happy Gardening to You!



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