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Gardening with Cynthia Brian: MIXED GREENS



Down the brick road flanked with azaleas Photos
Cynthia Brian

Full disclosure. I seek beauty in all things. I crave a myriad of colors and textures. I'm a determined gardener and a resolute foodie. Lush, gorgeous, fresh produce direct from the earth was a staple growing up on the farm. I don't remember perusing the super markets for greens. My Italian Swiss mother was a fabulous cook who could make a gourmet meal from what appeared to be nothing. Of course, she was an avid gardener and our vegetable patch spread across at least an acre. Year round we savored edibles plucked from the plot.

We grew up having "green fingers," which many people call "green thumbs." The fact is that we could all communicate with the earth transferring love and appreciation to living organisms. I was taught that if I wanted my garden to grow, or anything for that matter, love was the essential ingredient. A verdant heart produces a bountiful harvest. All the book learning in the world can't make up for the education we receive by putting our hands in the dirt.

With my pledge of "Read, Plant, Grow," my challenge for you this month is to mix your greens. Whether you decide to plant food or flowers, take more consideration with

form, textures, and colors. You spent the winter reading about gardening, now the climate is perfect to get out outside to plant. First you need good soil. Extract any weeds that are currently growing. For new beds, specifically raised beds, it's always a good idea to bring in new topsoil and fresh compost. In our clay soils, I like to mix in some sand to help with drainage. Turn the dirt and dig it well. When you are satisfied with the quality of your soil, it's time to select seeds and plant.

Are you a person who peppers your culinary productions with the flavors of herbs? Wouldn't it be delightful if you grew your own? You can. Ask yourself what flavors you enjoy most, then set out to plant the species. Like flowers, different herbs have different growing requirements. For example, sweet basil is an annual that demands rich, moist soil to thrive. Oregano on the other hand is a perennial that does best in dry conditions. It's a great herb where water conservation is encouraged. A few herbs that I cannot live without, both annual and perennial include Italian parsley, cilantro, sage, basil, fennel, thyme, lavender, chives, mint, dill, and tarragon. These eleven staples provide my kitchen with a plethora of seasoning for every meal.

Seeds will sprout soon on these easy to grow vegetables when you water regularly while providing at least 6 hours of sunshine per day.

Arugula: Space seeds about an inch apart and 1/4 to 1/2 deep. You'll start harvesting within 30 days.

Radishes, Carrots, and Beets: Spacing of seeds and depth is the same as arugula but plan on 60 days to maturity.

Lettuce: My favorite way to plant lettuces for a continual harvest is to dig a bed that is approximately twelve feet long. Then I sow about three feet of seeds each week for four weeks, which gives me a supply of lettuce all season long.

Parsley: A great herb that seeds itself providing you with breath freshening ingredients all year long.

Plant a few seeds in a container near the kitchen as well as in your herb garden. Clip often to encourage growth.

Perhaps you are not interesting in growing your own vegetables or herbs, but instead want a cutting garden. If you aren't sure how to mix your greens, order pre-designed gardens on-line or from garden magazines. They save you time, but don't always believe your garden will look like the advertisements. Take into account our climate, zone, and soil conditions. Annuals are terrific for cutting as are long blooming perennials. Consider planting zinnias, black-eyed Susan, purple coneflower, cosmos, nicotiana, snapdragon, sunflower, lavender, and celosia.

BUG OUT

Keep the insects out of the garden by planting herbs and flowers that repel bugs. Aphids detest the smell of marigolds, while other pests despise coriander, chives, lavender, and mint. Even deer prefer to stay away from mint patches. Beware of mint, though, as it is invasive and can easily take over your garden.

By spending time in your garden now mixing your greens, you'll be assured a summer of love. What time is dinner?



A perfect bed of mixed greens



Hedge of purple wisteria



The State Flower, California Poppies populate the garden
Photos Cynthia Brian



Smell the fragrance of the jasmine



Luscious homegrown strawberries



Cynthia Brian with her baby chicks, ducks, and geese

Happy Gardening to You!

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