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VOLUNTEERS-IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE!

By Cynthia Brian



A summer spectacle-Firecracker Photos Cynthia Brian

Being the Founder and the Executive Director of a literacy and positive media charity, I am normally excited about volunteers. But when it comes to volunteers in the garden, I am definitely not a fan. Before you believe me to be ungrateful, please know I am not talking about people, I'm talking about trees, plants, seeds, and weeds that appear in places where they were not planted.

Every morning, a cup of Java in hand, I stroll through my grounds investigating the latest sprouts. I intently look, listen, feel, smell, and taste as I walk. Because of the copious amounts of winter rain that showered our landscapes, my yard is plagued with mountains of weeds and swathed in seedlings from galaxies far, far away. In one square foot of dirt, six oaks, two bays, three pines, five plums, and a palm, all between four and six inches high, compete for the sun's warming rays. The center island of my front garden has hundreds of Japanese maple seedlings. The hillside is filled with chamomile, euphorbia, mulberry, wild grapes, privet, silk, pistache, and more oaks, none of which I sowed. Some of these volunteers I'll assign to other tasks, others are nuisances. This is my paradise, invaded by uninvited intruders.

When I first moved to Orinda, I remember how thrilled I was to witness the thousands of oak trees blanketing the hillsides. These majestic giants reminded me of my ranch home in Napa County where climbing trees and building forts was a cultivated art. Two decades later, I am not as enamored.

Most of us carefully design our front and backyards with a color palette and plant selection that suits our lifestyle and tastes. Although Mother Nature is always in charge, sometimes we humans must intervene to maintain a balance of power. Whether they blew in by the howling

winds, or hitchhiked on furred and feathered feeders, these seeds, acorns, and cuttings have rooted where they are not wanted. These are the unwelcome interlopers of the plant kingdom.

Don't get me wrong. I love trees and I have hundreds growing in exactly the right places. More than thirty lofty oaks shade the creeks on my property. A couple of trees still boast the rope and tire swings from my children's play days. Where there are oaks, poison oak flourishes alongside blackberry briars. I don't want any of the three crowding my gladiolas or interrupting the dance of the dahlias. My orchard is filled with cherries, apricots, plums, prunes, peaches, pears, apples, loquats, guavas, oranges, lemons, tangerines, tangelos, mulberries, and olives. It is a virtual Garden of Eden and my personal garden of eating. Admitting a myriad of volunteer visitors upsets the equilibrium that has been carefully designed and implemented.

So what is a gardener to do with all these additional pop-ups? My program consists of biweekly pulling, pruning, recycling, donating, and tossing. It is imperative to be constantly vigilant to maintain order and discourage a dark forest from developing.

Jungles arise when gardens are unmanaged. If you love your garden and want to maintain the integrity of your landscape, adopt an aggressive approach to weeding out the extras. Uproot and replant the specimens that you like and want, give away, sell, or compost the rest.

This year as a fundraiser for Be the Star You Are!(r) charity, (www.bethestaryouare.org) I am potting up my plant volunteers so that the human teen volunteers can sell them at the upcoming Pear Festival in September. The mission of the non-profit is to plant the seeds of literacy and grow people. Stop by the booth and, for a small donation, you can harvest the bounty from my jungle woodland and receive free gardening tips, too!

CYNTHIA BRIAN'S GARDENING GUIDE FOR AUGUST

"Steep thyself in a bowl of summer." Virgil

It's a bummer when summer draws to an end. The kids hate to think about going back to school. How did the time fly by so quickly? It's pleasant outside and we want to cram as much fun as possible into our final days of the season of sunshine. With the warm weather, we have lots of chores in the garden. While the children are running through the sprinklers, take a break to enjoy the lazy hazy days. Munch on peaches and pears straight from the tree, supper outside on the patio, sprawl on the grass to count the clouds, roast s'mores over a fire pit, dream in the

darkness of a moonless sky. It's summer and it's yummy. Have fun in the sun.

- AERATE your lawns with a hollow tine core aerator run in two or three directions. Make sure the soil is moist enough to allow extraction of two to three inch cores and leave the cores on your lawns. They'll break down and return to the soil with the new holes giving the lawn room to breath, allowing
 - the roots to go deeper.
- WATER lawns deeply to at least one inch per week. Frequent, short water cycles are not good for the root system.
 - CUT roses early in the morning or late in the afternoon to maintain the maximum moisture for cut flowers.
- MOVE baskets and pots to a shady area when you are traveling or going to be away from home for a few days to prevent sunburn or worse during hot August.
- EMPTY birdbaths and sources of standing water weekly to keep mosquitoes from hatching. The mosquitoes are especially nasty and ubiquitous this year because of the long rainy season.
- HARVEST your peppers, cucumbers, corn, tomatoes, and other ripe vegetables. Do not refrigerate tomatoes to maintain their natural sweetness.
 - DEADHEAD spent blossoms on annuals and perennials.
- REMOVE all brush, weeds, and fire hazards within a thirty-foot perimeter of your home. It's fire season and we want to be preventative.
 - PICK fruit as it ripens and dispose of any fallen fruit to prevent the attraction of fruit flies, slugs, and fungus.
 - FIRE up the barbecue and grill vegetables tossed with herbs from your potager.
 - MAKE nectar for the hummingbirds by boiling water with sugar. No need for red food coloring.
 - BAIT your yellow jacket traps every three weeks for sting-free outdoor enjoyment.
 - PINCH chrysanthemums now for a bushier fall showing.
 - RAKE more, ache less by keeping the rake close to your body, using short quick motions and switching sides every three minutes.
 - HELP birds, bees, and butterflies pollinate and populate by planting flowers and shrubs they love such as buddleia, salvias, aptenia, and lavender.
 - SHARPEN your lawn mower blades and raise them to a height of at least three inches.
 - FEED the birds by keeping seed readily available and planting bushes, berries, and other greenery attractive to them. In return they'll keep your garden pest free.
 - WATCH for ants in your artichokes and other edibles. This is a sign that aphids have invaded. Spray with water using a high-pressure nozzle or soapy water.
 - SUBMERGE potted plants in a large container of water until the bubbles disappear to keep moisture in the roots.
 - PULL out the jungle of volunteer seedlings growing in your garden.
 - READ a book about nature. How about Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul for a dose of inspiration mixed with perspiration?
 - SCHEDULE time to nap in a hammock on a hot August night.
 - ATTACH a rope swing to your big oak tree and shove off. It's fun to be a kid again.

May the sun shine in your garden and the stars in your heart.

Happy Summer and Gardening to you.

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The fragrant purple artichoke bloom amidst sweet basil



Birds, Butterflies, and Bees love the Silk and Buddellia Trees



Cynthia Brian in her jungle of pink bowers

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