

Published December 8th, 2010

## December 2010 - Digging Deep Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian-Gifts of the Garden



Magenta cymbidium orchid with peacock and pheasant feathers makes a wonderful gift. Photo Cynthia Brian

Other than a trip to Disneyland, traveling to my mother's gardens during the holiday season is an experience to remember. Her acres of flora are spectacular any time of the year, but from early December until January 6th the grounds are turned into a dazzling winter wonderland of color, light, sound, and fragrance. Growing up on the farm in Napa Valley, we five children anticipated Christmas a full three hundred and thirty days every year. The other thirty-five days were spent in total ecstasy as we played, sang, and celebrated this festival of merriment.

Since we lived so far away from the city lights (down in the boondocks as we lovingly referred to our valley), Mom and Dad told us it was imperative that we decorated the gardens and orchards so that Santa could find his way to our vineyards. Oh, how many nights we spent scanning the star lit sky for any sign of his sleigh sailing through the galaxy! Rudolph's bright red nose would be spotted on Christmas Eve after we had distributed many gifts from the garden and kitchen to friends and family. We'd rush home from midnight Mass to fill a bucket of freshly harvested carrots as a treat for the tired reindeer and of course, leave Santa and the elves plates of homemade cookies accompanied by a bouquet of cyclamen or roses for Mrs.

Claus. The secret to a happy holiday was always centered on giving from the garden.

The magic and majesty of our holiday traditions continues today as I learn the lessons from my mother's garden while designing my own. No matter what the temperature of the economy, the best things that come from the garden are gifts for other people. Whether you have a large or small plot, a cornucopia of creative concepts abound in the ground. Whether decorative, culinary, or keepsake, homemade presents are always appreciated because they truly come from the heart. Here's a list of ideas for your green holiday giving.

- If you have pine trees, gather pinecones. Fill a Santa hat and wrap with a bow.
- Fill large pinecones with peanut butter. Tie a ribbon from the stem, wrap in cellophane and make a tag, "For the birds only!" Everyone loves watching the birds enjoy their treats.
- Allow some rose hips to form on your favorite rose bushes. Cut a stem of bright red rose hips along with a spray of lavender, tie with cheerful trim, and add a recipe for a vitamin C fragrant tea.
- Amaryllis is a spectacular long lasting bloomer available in a variety of colors perfect for the season. Plant a bulb earlier in the season for a December show, or buy a flowering plant now and place it in a watering can or decorative bucket to give as a garden gift.
- Dry flowers for potpourri and make beautiful sachets and aromatic fresheners.
- Gather and press flowers in unique compositions against a velvet background in a gilded frame reminiscent of the Victorian era.
- For the feline on your gift list, construct a sturdy pillow filled with catnip.
- Preserve the favor, appearance, taste, and aroma of favorite flowers and leaves by making candy from violets, rose petals, lilac florets, citrus peels, and mint. (Caution-make sure that all the flowers and leaves you use for any gastronomic treats are indeed edible. Don't guess-be certain!)
- Flavor a cup of sugar by mixing in 3/4 cup of fresh petals of roses, lemon balm, lavender, verbena, geranium, or mint. Sprinkle on fruit, dust a Yule log, or sweeten a holiday punch.
- For enchanting savory treats, package carafes of herbed vinegar and olive oil using sprigs of basil, tarragon, dill, thyme, rosemary, or nasturtium. Add a couple of gloves of garlic for zing.
- Buy four-inch color spots and line a French bread basket. Top with tinsel.
- Give rooted cuttings of your favorite plants in a variety of pretty recycled jars.
- Customize your gifts by giving a mushroom farm with a box of herbs to a chef or mints, lemons, and limes to a bartender.
- Make table place cards for the party host of pomander balls using thick-skinned fruit such as oranges, apples, lemons, grapefruit, and limes. Stud with cloves, roll in allspice, and slide the nametags between the cloves.
- Pull up volunteer trees from your yard, making sure to protect the roots. Plant in holiday themed urns, practical containers, or refurbished canisters.
- Teens can collect discarded CD's, string a glittering ribbon through the center, and present a box as decor for a shimmering outdoor tree. (Great to deter the birds and squirrels from your persimmon trees!)

- For the gardener, wrap a basket containing a high quality pruner, exotic seeds, the book, Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul, a pair of heavy-duty gloves, and a bottle of hand lotion.

- Buy cymbidium orchids with two or more glorious blooming stems for under \$20 throughout December. Add a peacock or pheasant feather, wrap in Chanukah, Christmas, or Kwanza cloth, and write a homemade sticker that reads, "Water weekly with warm H2O. Keep in 50-70 degrees providing moderate light. Celebrate beauty!"

Over the years some of my favorite gifts from my family have been bales of hay, yards of manure, shovels, chain saws, boots, shredders, tillers, hoes, and boxes of gloves. Every once in awhile, I'll get a gift certificate for a massage or a manicure, or better yet, a pledge of a few hours of helping hands. Friends often chuckle at my lack of interest for babbles and bangles as presents, but my garden is my jewel box, my preferred sparkling diamond in nature.

Whether you make wreathes, cards, ornaments, jellies, salts, or just wrap up a few pinecones, this holiday season, have fun spending time with your family creating natural delights and a dazzling winter wonderland with color, light, sound, and fragrance. Light up the life of those you love and give the gift of, from, and for the garden.

HAPPY, HEALTHY HOLIDAYS!!

Cynthia Brian's Digging Deep Gardening Guide For December

"Nature gives to every time and season some beauties of its own." Charles Dickens

With all the suggestions on how you can give of, from, and for the garden, I'm sure you are ready to start digging deep. We do have a bit of work to do before the winter storms. Get ready, get set, grow!

- SPREAD three inches of compost around perennials to insulate against the coming onslaught of cold weather. When warm temperatures return, the nutrient rich cover acts as a feeder.

- WASH empty pots and containers with a bleach solution, then store upside down until spring planting season.

- LOWER the blades of your lawn mower to a two-inch height and give one final fertilizing.

- HYDRATE young plants with deep watering to prevent frostbite.

- BRING tender outdoor plants indoors for over wintering, or move close to the warmth of the house foundation. You may want to spray with a fog to prevent freezing.

- DIG in the rest of your spring flowering bulbs now-daffodils, tulips, crocus, snowdrops, and scillas. Plant in drifts of a dozen.

- REMOVE all diseased or bug infested plants and toss with the trash. Do not compost!

- FEED the birds by allowing sunflowers, aster, Echinacea seedpods to remain on the plants.

- POSITION poinsettias in a barrel of ferns for a splash of color at the front door.

- DONATE to your favorite charity. It is the season of giving.

Mine of course, is Be the Star You Are!(r) 501c3

(<http://www.bethestaryouare.org>)

- PICK persimmons and pomegranates to use in your culinary feasts.

- PLANT bare root berry bushes, asparagus, grapes, and artichokes.

- PROTECT birds of paradise or other tender perennials by covering them with burlap covers or even dog blankets.

- PRUNE rose bushes for a final flurry of flowers. For rose hips, don't prune.

- FINISH planting all spring blooming bulbs. For months of future blooms, plant throughout the month.

- SPREAD peanut butter in pinecones to feed overwintering birds, or buy seed to fill your feeders.

- BRING branches from your evergreen trees inside to use as inexpensive holiday decor. The fresh fragrance gives your home a cozy, festive feeling.

- CHECK out the new documentary, Tapping the Source, where I encourage viewers to turn failure into fertilizer.

(<http://www.tappingthesourcemovie.com>)

- CONTINUE our quest to READ, PLANT, GROW!

May the magic, miracles, and memories with family and friends be your greatest gift this December.

Keep digging deep-it's the power of your source.

Happy Gardening to you!

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The Goddess Gardener



Close up of rose hips from a pink bonica bush. Photo Cynthia Brian

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