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Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian Seeds of Change



Deep green curly leafed parsley grown in a container from seed is a culinary perennial pleaser. Photos Cynthia Brian

The first blush of spring surprised me with the warm sunny days in the first two weeks of February. I hadn't even completed the final dormant spray of horticultural oil to kill the overwintering insects on my fruit trees when the branches burst into bud, followed by bountiful blooms. Every St. Patrick's Day, I count on the magnificent magenta blossoms of the white Italian peach tree outside my dining room window to set the stage for the March 17 celebration. Not this year. The tree climaxed twenty-seven days earlier than in past seasons as did my plums and prunes, finishing their spectacular show before March even dawned.

Climate change? Global warming? What does a gardener do?

My seed catalogues have been piled high on my nightstand since early January awaiting those dreary, rainy days when I would snuggle under covers swaddled with my finest flora fantasies. Since nature makes no mistakes, and my slumbering garden hastened to awake prematurely, I knew that whether winter weather raged on or not, it was time for me to pore over my periodicals if I wanted to share my simple steps for seeding with you.

In a natural setting, plants grow mostly from the tiny miracles we call seeds. There are numerous companies

offering seeds to suit every garden including heirlooms, ingredients are necessary to have success with seeds:

1. Prepare the soil properly by enriching it with compost, earthworms, and mulch.
2. Follow the instructions for planting printed on the seed packet.
3. Water appropriately.
4. Thin seedlings as recommended.
5. Weed the area consistently.

With our variable weather patterns, how will you know when the soil is ready and warm enough for planting seeds? Drop your pants! Yes, that's right. It's the way farmers have tested the soil for generations. If you can sit on the ground with your bare bottom for thirty seconds without feeling as if you are sitting in a cold puddle, your ground is set to go. (Warning, try this only in the privacy of your backyard so as not to startle your neighbors!) Another method, probably more suited to city and suburban living, is to grab a handful of dirt, shape it into a ball, and squeeze. If water drip outs like a wet sponge, your soil is too moist to plant. Instead, start your seedlings indoors.

Seed suppliers ascertain that the easiest seeds to grow are beans, cucumbers, peas, pumpkins, radishes, squash, cosmos, lettuces, sunflowers, and zinnias. Help children learn the joy of growing by giving them a selection of these simple to sprout seeds.

With my determination to Explore, Experiment, and Experience I perused numerous catalogues to discover unique seeds to change my garden dynamics.

My favorite seeds herald from many sources, with Renee's Garden, John Scheepers, and Seed Savers Exchange topping my list. Renee's Garden publicity boasts that it offers the best vegetable and herb seeds to grow successful food as well as carefree flowers that enchant the senses and warm the heart. Since I'm exploring planting vegetables in containers this season, I ordered a new herbal tea plant, Zinger Hibiscus, with attractive lobed leaves and creamy flowers that make an antioxidant packed delicious ruby-colored tea with a cranberry and floral flavor. Renee also offers French Chervil. My readers will be happy since I've received so many emails asking where this herb can be found. I'm also excited about two types of carrots, the tricolor Circus Circus and the French baby Babette as well as the baby cabbage, Pixie. I will be setting a table in the garden if Little Prince, the container eggplant, Primor, the French Baby Leeks, and the Candystrip jewel-toned beets thrive. In the flower department, I'm experimenting with Zinfandel fragrant sweet peas, Cinco de May Amaranth, Cappucino Rudbeckia, and perfumed Heliotrope.

Seed Savers Exchange, a nonprofit, member supported organization, has been the national leader in collecting and preserving heirloom veggies, herbs, and flowers for over three decades. Their catalog contains six hundred varieties with proceeds continuing their mission to preserve genetic diversity. They have a collection of over a thousand different lettuces. I have ordered their curly, frilled dark red leafed and mildly flavored Mascara and a packet mixed with Australian Yellowleaf, Pablo, Red Velvet, and five other of their favorite seeds. Their impressive selection of sunflowers has also piqued my interest.

John Scheepers Kitchen Garden Seeds began serving fine gardens in 1908. An old-fashioned favorite are fava

beans, which can be harvested in about 65 days. My Italian grandfather always grew favas and we enjoyed eating the tiny tender pods while the older beans went into his hearty risotto. Rhubarb became a favorite of mine when I spent time in Ireland with my pen pal. If you start the seeds this month indoors, they will produce a few stalks this summer, then in subsequent years you'll get a full crop. The leaves are poisonous so don't mistake them for Swiss Chard.

Scheppers offers four types of Habitat Garden seed packs. Attract butterflies, bumblebees, hummingbirds, and songbirds, all beneficial to a healthy, happy habitat.

Both Renee's Garden and John Scheepers support earth-friendly nonprofit fundraising with special pricing and discounting. Go to their web sites for more information.

Resources:

Renee's Garden Seeds:

<http://www.reneesgarden.com>

Seed Savers Exchange:

<http://www.seedsavers.org>

John Scheepers Kitchen Garden Seeds:

<http://www.kitchengardenseeds.com>

While winter rages on, don't just dream of next season's vibrant, beautiful, and delicious crops. Plot your garden today, prepare the ground, buy your seeds, and welcome the opportunity to change your garden world by reintroducing heirlooms and experimenting with new samplers. When the warm days arrive to stay, you'll be ready to welcome the herbal and floral treasures your imagination designed with seeds of change.

Happy gardening to you!



Plum trees' rosy blossoms perfume the Lamorinda skies.



Cynthia Brian

CYNTHIA'S DIGGING DEEP GARDEN GUIDE FOR MARCH

Mother Nature has been playing with us by teasing us with warmth and sunshine, then sending torrential showers and freezing temperatures! As much as we are all chomping on the bit to get outside and plant, we'd be better served by enjoying the glorious daffodils singing to the sun while preparing our soil for seeding as the temperatures grow warmer. There is still plenty of work for you to do to prepare for the Spring Equinox and dancing in the moonlight.

"Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant." Robert Louis Stevenson 1850-1895, Essayist, Poet and Novelist

- EXPLORE a creek bed to search for wild watercress.
- EXPERIMENT in gathering wild mustard and miner's lettuce to add to your cuisine.
- EXPERIENCE the Bouquets of Art Exhibit at the de Young Museum March 14-19 featuring 150 floral arrangements complimenting the permanent collection. For information visit <http://www.bouquetsofart.org>
- PAMPER yourself with an exfoliating and moisturizing facial from your garden. Squeeze lemon juice from your Meyer lemon tree into a bowl and mix with lavender petals and 1/4 cup olive oil. Home brewed spa experience in 20 minutes.
- FORCE branches of crabapple, quince, forsythia, and red bud by placing your tree prunings in a bucket of water in a dark place until the buds swell. Move the branches to a beautiful vase filled with warm water and enjoy the show. Change the water daily and add a few drops of bleach to ward off bacteria.
- TRIM dead foliage from your ornamental grasses using sharp hedge clippers.
- CONTINUE to compost, compost, and compost. This is the single most important ingredient of growing a great garden. Buy an inexpensive compost bin from your local waste service.
- SPADE six inches of rich compost into your vegetable garden in preparation for the next season's plantings.
- SOAK bare-root shrubs, roses, and trees in tepid water for four hours to rehydrate them before planting.
- BUY seed packets from catalogues or your favorite garden center. Be brave and explore new samplers.
- START seeds indoors in flats to get a jump on spring.
- SPREAD alfalfa pellets mixed with diatomaceous earth around your rose bushes to promote large blooms and healthy plants. I buy my pellets at a feed store in 50 pound bags.
- DIVIDE daylilies and agapanthus now.
- MOW lawns weekly and fertilize with a high nitrogen mix.
- FILTER your indoor air with houseplants. According to NASA, 87 percent of volatile organic compounds are removed by live plants naturally. Now that is nothing to sneeze over!
- BREATHE in the fragrance of the early blooming gardenias and citrus blossoms. Bring in a few springs as natural air fresheners.
- AERATE your lawn. The soil is compacted from winter rains and foot traffic. Leave the plugs to add nutrients back into the grass.
- CONTINUE to protect frost tender plants with coverings. Mother Nature has a way of sending us unexpected cold fronts.
- PICK up camellias blossoms that have fallen to the ground. Decaying blooms harbor petal blight.
- ORDER one of my books from my web site, <http://www.star-style.com/store/index.htm> and receive a FREE packet of seeds. For details email me at Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com.
- SHARPEN and clean garden tools. You'll be busy next month.
- SCATTER a canister of California poppy seeds for a carefree, drought tolerant golden showstopper.
- VISIT the San Francisco Flower and Garden Show at the San Mateo Country Fairgrounds March 23-27 to witness landscape exhibits by renowned designers and attend informational seminars. <http://www.sfgardenshow.com/>.
- RELAX with a cup of herbal tea and a good book. Winter is wavering. Hang in there! It's almost that season of contented renewal. Until then, keep digging deep and explore, experiment, and experience.

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My virtual door is always open.
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