

Ask Cynthia Brian, Your Gardening Guide on the Side

Steep thyself in a bowl of summer. --Virgil

Throughout the year, Lamorinda Weekly readers email me with horticultural queries. Many gardeners share the same concerns. These are the three most popular inquiries this year.

Question: How can I bring butterflies to my garden?

Answer: Our beautiful winged friends are drawn to bright, cheerful flowers. When you plant a garden filled with their favorite feasts, you have planned their party. Echinacea, zinnia, butterfly bush, penstemon, lantana, Mexican sunflowers, and cosmos are a few of the floral favors. Lilac bushes and wildflowers are also attractive. Encourage them to stay longer and multiply, by growing host plants such as milkweed, fennel, parsley, and dill for their offspring to dine al fresco. The eggs hatch into caterpillars, hungrily nibbling on the treats until metamorphose magic. Keep a small saucer of muddy water for them to sip a cool drink. If you planted a potager, your herbs, flowers, and vegetables will be mingled together offering the best retreat for these colorful insects.

Question: Last year I had gorgeous daffodil blooms. This year, not a single daffodil flowered, but there were loads of beautiful leaves. What happened?

Answer: This is the most frequent complaint I get in the spring from gardeners who love a perfect yard. My guess is that last spring after your daffodil blooms faded you either cut, braided, or tied the leaves before they had a chance to completely die back. As unsightly as they are, it is imperative to allow the yellowing leaves to naturally disintegrate for the photosynthesis to feed the bulb for the following season. When the leaves are golden brown and crackly like a potato chip, then, and only then is it time to clean up the plant. If you find it unsightly to leave the fading leaves in your beds, plant annuals or a ground cover around the daffodils. By doing this, you will ensure double the amount of blooms next season. By the way, this procedure is necessary for all blooming spring bulbs, not just daffodils. In my garden, I clean up the browned leaves during the month of June, adding them to the compost bin.

Question: I have a pond with a recirculating pump, yet, there are mosquito larvae swimming around. What do I do?

Answer: Now that the sunny weather has finally arrived and summer is around the corner, we have to be proactive with keeping the mosquitoes at bay. Some mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus dangerous to humans, while others endanger the lives of our canine friends by infecting them with heartworm disease. Be vigilant in emptying any standing water as even a couple of tablespoons in a container entices mosquitoes. When the weather heats up, it takes three to five days for the larvae to mature into breeding, biting brats.

Probably your pump isn't powerful enough. It may be stirring the water surrounding the immediate area of where it is installed leaving still or stagnant areas at the other end of the pond. My suggestion is to add mosquito fish which, when mature at one inch of length, will devour up to five hundred mosquito larvae per day. Depending on the size of your pond, goldfish or koi are voracious eaters, although you may want to install netting over the pond to deter the fishing raccoons. You can also buy Mosquito Dunks at your local garden center or hardware store. These two-inch floaters contain *Bacillus thuringiensis v. israelensis*, slowly releasing the BT on the water surface. It gradually sinks to the bottom where the larvae feed on it and die. The Mosquito Dunks are not harmful to wildlife, fish, or humans. They last three to four weeks with one dunk covering twenty five to hundred surface feet. You can cut them into quarters for smaller areas. If you feel you have a mosquito problem, abatement is offered for free by the Contra Costa County Vector Control Department. Call 925-685-9301 and ask for an inspector to come to your property. They will spray and also give you mosquito fish. In the early 1900's, parts of Contra Costa County were uninhabitable because of mosquitoes and the diseases they brought including malaria and encephalitis. Mosquito abatement began in 1927 and our health has been a priority ever since.



Cynthia's amazing artichokes--beautiful and delicious.

Photos Cynthia Brian

Question: What is your favorite specimen in your garden?

Answer: This is an unfair question! It's like asking me which of my children I love most. Since you've been reading *Digging Deep-Gardening with Cynthia*, you already know that I am a zealous, hands-in-the-muck, extreme DIY gardener. I get excited literally every day when something new bursts into bloom. This year, in the vegetable department, I am head over heels with my two artichoke plants growing in my potager. They have provided bushels of sweet, almost thistle free scrumptiousness for weeks with no end in sight. The most unusual delight is the triple blooms of my scarlet red amaryllis. Normally entertaining me at Christmas, it surprised me with a dazzling dinner plate size display this week. Finally, my roses have never been more glorious. My home is filled with their brilliance and fragrance. (FYI--July *Digging Deep* will be a tribute to these precious plants.) Because of the rains, my orchard is disappointing. I have no cherries, apricots, or Santa Rosa plums this year. There will be a small crop of Asian pears, apples, peaches, loquats, mulberries, currants, grapes, tangelos, tangerines, guavas, lemons, and chestnuts, assuming mild weather conditions and minimal interference from the abundant wildlife. As hoped, my purple plums are right on schedule to ripen on June 22.



Cynthia's favorite Amaryllis.

Thank you for your questions and for reading this column. It's a pleasure to be your gardening guide. If you want to be happy, healthy, and tranquil, start digging deep!

Hello summer and happy gardening to you!