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Digging Deep-Gardening with Cynthia Brian The Lawn Ranger

By Cynthia Brian



Lush, green, verdant lawns are for playing, cartwheeling, and memory making Photos Cynthia Brian

Lawns. People love them or hate them. There seems not to be an in-between.

I err on the side of adoration. Not politically or ecologically correct these days to live amongst the lawn lovers, for me, rich, green, luxurious turf hold magical memories worth the water and the work. Endless hours of enjoyment tumbling, somersaulting, cheerleading, Frisbee throwing, badminton, croquet, playing catch, football rumbles, horseshoes, and camping filled my childhood and that of my children on lawns. How wonderful it was to throw a towel on the grass and gaze at the clouds or meteor showers! Lawns were the location of training puppies, cuddling kittens, and collecting dandelions to blow in the wind as delicate angels of flight. In college, I'd take mini naps between classes lounging on the grass with my backpack as my pillow. A soft green carpet of inviting lawn has always been a welcome security blanket no matter where I've traveled throughout the world. Washington Irving said it best with his comment "Society is like a lawn where every roughness is smoothed, every bramble eradicated, and where the eye is delighted by the smiling verdure of a velvet surface." In short, lawns provide optimism about the world we live in.

If you are thinking about installing a patch of green, this is the time to begin the preparation. Fall is a great time to seed or sod in our part of the country. For both type of installations, you need to prepare the soil by removing weeds, rocks, stones, roots, and other plants.

If you've had a difficult time growing anything in your yard, get your soil tested and contact the University of California Extension office for advice. Once the site is level, the soil has been tilled and enriched, you are ready to scatter your seed or roll out the sod. If you have a small area to beautify, throwing seed covered in peat moss may be the best decision. I recommend netting the square to keep the hungry birds away from this dining buffet.

Most homeowners in Lamorinda demand instant beauty. If this describes you, sod is your answer. Although more costly initially, sod provides a thick, durable surface with immediate satisfaction. Think of sod as a yard of turf in box that rolls like a carpet into any space you wish. A sod combination of perennial rye grass mixed with pureblue grass provides a glossy green finish. Before you install sod, check out neighborhood lawns that you like. Be brave and ask the name of the variety of grass and the growing experience, then purchase the same type. Abide by the installation instructions, including specifications for watering, feeding, and mowing.

In general, lawns require more water than perennial gardens, including at least two fertilizations per year, in the spring and autumn, weekly mowing in the warm season, and occasional de-thatching and aerating as needed. For strong root development, water in the morning, deeply and infrequently. My trick for a healthy lawn is to mulch with the lawn clippings by eliminating the catch bag while mowing plus raise the blade on the mower an inch higher. The longer grass keeps the roots cooler while the lawn clippings put nitrogen back into the soil. A daily weed-pulling trek around the perimeter deters the invasives. Although my husband disagrees with me, I enjoy infiltrating our lawn with the delicate, yet hardy isotoma blue star creeper for a splash of surprise. If your garden is extremely shady and wet, you may want to plant a patch of baby tears.

A popular alternative to the mow hungry traditional lawns is ornamental grass, such as silver blue fescue. These "almost maintenance free" grasses are available in a variety of heights, colors, and textures. They are especially useful on hillsides for erosion control and in places where minimal water is available. Lambs ears, dichondria, ajuga, and other ground covers can also be used in shadier areas where mowing is difficult. Iceplant has been used in dry areas, although I find it attractive only when it is flowering in the spring.

Gravel lawns are becoming increasing popular. With our California outdoor lifestyle, gardeners who want to preserve water and spend minimal hours tending turf have begun installing floors of pea gravel or crushed stone. If this is your environmental choice, the depth of the gravel is critical. If it is laid too deep, you'll feel as though you

are trudging through snow. Create a base layer of stones that are one or two inches in length, flatten with a compactor, than add two or three inches of crushed gravel or pea gravel on top for a very stable surface that drains well and weed free. If you are a bit artistic, allow volunteer plants such as verbena or silver spires of Verbascum to sprout for visual interest. Add a fountain or water feature, border the gravel carpet with large boulders, and beds of lavender, succulents, agaves, sunflowers, and native grasses. For a Southwestern look, throw in an old wagon wheel or rusty water pump to accessorize.

Outside my Starstyle(r) Studio, I have a bed of lush green moss under the redwood tree amid the rhododendrons and azaleas. On a hot day the soft coolness of the moss offers a refreshing respite while conducting a consultation on the bench outside my office. Irish moss, Scotch moss, and creeping thyme can be lovely natural rugs in small patches.

Unless you plan on being a slave to your lawn, hiring a service, or paying exorbitant amounts for water and maintenance, don't compare your turf to the local golf course. It will never measure up. Perfectionists do not noble lawn caretakers make! But if you are a lawn ranger like me and ready to run through the sprinklers, put up with a few brown spots, and pull the occasional weed, your lawn will provide priceless life memories long after the expenses are forgotten.

Here's to cartwheels, sow bugs, hoses, and running barefoot through the grass. Long live lawns!

Cynthia Brian's Garden Guide for September

"The apple does not fall far from the tree!" Yiddish proverb

September is apple season. I fondly remember 4-H events as a child where we "bobbed for apples" sticking our heads into a barrel of water filled with floating pomes. Thinking back, it doesn't seem very sanitary, yet no one ever got sick. Perhaps the adage about "an apple a day keeps the doctor away" is indeed true. School is back in session and apples make a healthy, nutritious, low calorie snack packed with fiber. As you tend your autumn garden, involve your children in your activities. They will learn to be stewards of our planet by watching your choices and participating in your passions. I definitely didn't fall far from my farm family tree.

- BOOST your healing power by plucking ripe tomatoes straight from the vine. Classified as both a vegetable and a fruit, the primary nutrient in tomatoes is lycopene, a powerful antioxidant that neutralizes free radicals and possibly guards against your risk of heart disease, osteoporosis, and diabetes.

- BREATHE new life into a tired vegetable garden by adding a playful combination of fall weather crops with festive grey-blue hues such as cilantro, kale, and ornamental cabbages.

- VISIT the Be the Star You Are!(r) charity booth at the Moraga Pear Festival on Saturday, September 24th for complimentary seeds. Buy an autographed copy of the New York Times best seller, Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul and Be the Star You Are!(r) for TEENS to receive FREE potpourri. You'll be supporting the tornado torn schools and hospitals in Joplin, Missouri.

- THIN perennials and transplant to other parts of your garden or share with neighbors.

- FEED camellias, roses, azaleas, gardenias, and fruit trees.

- CHECK out the new bulbs for spring available now from catalogues and some retailers. Next year's daffodils are sensational.

- SUBSCRIBE to a CSA program (Community Supported Agriculture) for farm fresh produce shipped to your home if you don't have your own vegetable garden or fruit orchard yet want the freshest seasonal favorites.

- DOWNLOAD the Bonide Best Solutions app which helps consumers search by name or photo to identify a problem with pests, weeds, and diseases. Available for iPhones, Droid, and Blackberry.

- GOPHER-PROOF your garden by building raised beds with a wire mesh bottom. If you already have gophers, try putting a stick of chewing gum or Exlax down their hole. Let me know your results!

- SOW seeds of short season varieties of vegetables and herbs that tolerate cooler nights and shorter days for a late fall feast. Experiment with mesclun mixes, salad greens, arugula, peas, dill, and broccoli raab.

- PARTY on the patio with all the elements of great entertaining by having the sounds of a fountain nearby, fall colored leaves as table ornaments, and a fire pit to warm the guests as the evening chills.

- PROPOGATE lilies by removing a few scales from the outside of a parent bulb then providing a clean tray filled with sphagnum moss or vermiculite until bulblets form. Make sure to label the type of lily bulb you are growing.

- EXPERIMENT in shady areas by planting varieties of ferns. Ferns tolerate moist to moderately dry soil, and the best news is, drum roll please...deer detest them.

- ADD botanical diversity to a barren or deprived site by collecting your perennial seeds and tossing them in those horticultural challenged arenas.

- SEND me high quality pics of your glorious garden with a description and they may get published. Email Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com.

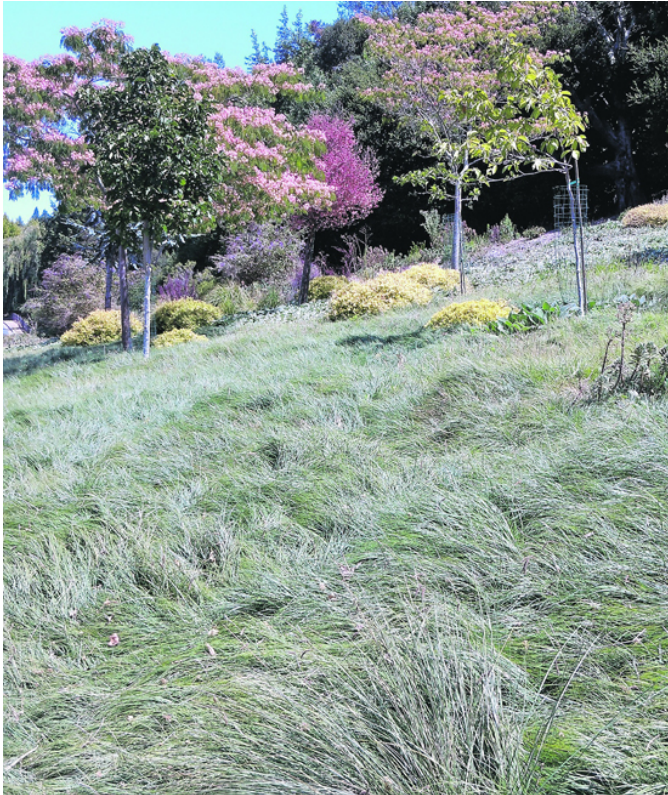
- TAP into your inner rainbow by coordinating colorful autumn annuals with the changes in the leaves for your front garden.

- CUT bouquets of the perky pink Naked Ladies for a long-lived indoor arrangement. I love these glorious gals, and hooray, another floriferous favorite despised by the dear deer!

- EAT fresh, crisp red, green, or yellow apples straight from the tree. Don't peel them as 2/3 of the antioxidants and most of the nutrition is in the peel!



A close up of moss, a soft rug for small, damp areas.



A sea of waving silver tipped ornamental grasses graces the hillside with watermelon crepe myrtle and the pink puffs of the Silk Tree in the background.

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