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Home Grown Holiday! Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian



Holiday centerpiece Photo Cynthia Brian

"Christmas gift suggestions: To your enemy, forgiveness. To an opponent, tolerance. To a friend, your heart. To a customer, service. To all, charity. To every child, a good example. To yourself, respect." - Oren Arnold

The season for holiday gift gathering began for our family in the summer. It was then that we picked the peaches, pears, apricots, berries, and a cornucopia of vegetables to can and give to friends and relatives for Christmas. My sisters and I gathered wild flowers and colorful leaves which we pressed between wax paper creating our own version of stained glass windows. In November we would decorate the jars, adding hand drawn labels, and in December the baking would begin. Wooden boxes would be filled with candied and savory walnuts from our trees, wine from our grapes, preserves from our orchards, eggs from our chickens, garlicky tomato sauce from our gardens, and spiced cookies from our imagination. After collecting miniature pinecones from around the yard to mold into reusable ornaments, the packages were festooned with fanciful yarns, colorful ribbons, and a hearty greeting to be delivered with a smile. Every recipient received a present

specifically designed with items we knew they'd enjoy. We all felt as jolly as St. Nick himself.

Over the years commercialism has taken over the season of giving. It's easy to zip into a store to purchase presents and have them wrapped and shipped. It's even less hassle to go on-line to order something for everyone on Santa's list. Yet, somehow, I am still drawn to the love, thought, and sweet individuality that handcrafted gifts exude. I enjoy meandering through my garden contemplating the gifts that are hidden within its boundaries and branches. Who will be the fortunate beneficiary of these heavenly delights? With the return to the earth movement in full swing, this December is the right time for you to employ a personalized home grown holiday.

Instead of cutting down a tree, start by purchasing a living evergreen that you can save in the pot for next year or if you have the space, plant for posterity. Let nature's winter wardrobe of berries and boughs inspire your holiday decorating. Evergreen trees with colorful berries include Chinese holly with yellow berries; English holly with red berries, North American native red cedar with fragrant foliage and frosty blue berries; and Brazilian peppertree with red peppercorns that are piquant in savory dishes. A deciduous merry berry tree that bears pink and aqua colored fruits is the pistache, a favorite food of squirrels, birds, and turkeys. If you have pines, redwoods, or other conifers in your yard, cut branches to weave into wreaths, centerpieces, and garlands, along with pinecones, dried flowers, mushrooms, or other natural reeds. Decorate outdoor trees with strings of popcorn, cranberries, and rose hips that the birds will enjoy.

While poinsettias, paper whites, jams, jellies, and kitchen treats are always welcome, a few trouble-free gift-giving ideas inspired by the garden include:

- Holiday Napkin Rings made from bendable twigs
- Fragrant Potpourri
- Bay Leaf Garlands
- Rose Petal Sachets
- Lavender Bath Salts
- Aromatherapy Oils
- Apple-Clove Pomanders
- Herbed Olive Oil
- Pinecone Fire Starters
- Pressed Flower Greeting Cards
- Seed Catalog Journals
- Grapevine Wreaths
- Herbal Teas
- Infused Vinegars
- Potted Candles
- Terrariums
- Forced Bulbs in Glass Vases
- Seeds from your Favorite Specimens
- Birdseed Balls

How-to lessons are ubiquitous on the internet. Other great garden offerings available at your favorite garden

center are high quality tools, aprons, solar lights, pots, indoor plants, wind chimes, botanical art, gazing balls, and garden books. (My book, Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul, is still a best seller for all those who love nature with autographed copies available from my office, 925-377-STAR.) Besides the hand made riches from my children, my favorite gifts over the years have included hay, soil, shovels, plants, pruning shears, gloves, buckets, fertilizers, hats, chain saws, birdbaths, fountains, and other gardening necessities. Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruits would be as delighted as I am with the bonus of home made pastries, jams, pie filling, and condiments from the fields of friends and family.

For a hoe, hoe, hoe holiday sparkle, plant memories and grow green with aesthetically arresting home grown gifts from your garden that really show you care and share.



Wreath with hydrangea blossoms



Cyclamen with Christmas Cactus in the back Photo Cynthia Brian

CYNTHIA BRIAN'S GARDENING GUIDE FOR DECEMBER

"Gratitude is the fairest blossom which springs from the soul." Henry Ward Beecher

With Thanksgiving behind us, we now move on to the season of grace, gratitude, and glory with Christmas, Hannukah, and Kwanza. As we drive through neighborhoods, gardens are illuminated, bedecked and bedazzled ushering in the most favorite time of year for children around the globe. December is a time for reflection, rest, and regrouping with loved ones. Take the time to treasure the short days and long nights by bringing a bit of nature indoors with branches of evergreens, berries, persimmons, and pomegranates. Make a pot of herbal tea, curl up by the fire with a good book, and savor the season of giving.

- BE green and buy a living Christmas tree that can grow in splendor. Artificial trees are non-recyclable or biodegradable.
- KEEP your tree fresh longer by placing a freshly cut trunk in a bucket of water before placing in a tree stand. Water daily without floral preservatives.
- BRIGHTEN the holidays with breathtaking blooms of amaryllis. Available in many colors, they'll bloom in 6-8 weeks after planting in any light.
- DRESS your plants for the holidays with red berries and glossy leaves gleaned from the garden.
- INCREASE concentration by placing leafing and flowering greenery around your house.
- HARVEST prickly pear when the skins are red. Wear gloves and use tongs to peel before adding to salads.
- HARNESS inner peace by exercising or meditating outdoors in your yard or a park on a sunny day. Being in nature relieves stress and the fresh air revitalizes you.

- FORAGE for wild watercress in creeks. Cut stems, leaving the roots, wash thoroughly and enjoy with meals.
 - LEAVE fallen leaves on your lawn. Mow the grass without a grass catcher to help mulch your lawn over winter.
 - BUILD a bat house for our endangered insect eaters. Visit www.batcon.org for approved bat house building instructions. Bats have received a bad reputation over the years but they are friends to humans. Next summer each bat will eat 1000 mosquitoes in an hour!
 - MIGRATING birds, hummingbirds, and butterflies benefit from feeder feasts. Make sure to keep a few drifts of perennials such as fuchsia, honeysuckle, and asters available as landing dinner pads.
 - BUGS bothering your plants? Click on the free on-line tool called "Puttng the Detective on the Case" at www.gardeners.com. A list of plant-specific suspects will be generated with detailed images to match with more than eighty close-up, color photographs to help gardeners determine the disease or the pest.
 - REJUVENATE your soil by planting cover crops of fava beans, vetch, alfalfa, clover, or mustard to add nutrients for next season with this special green manure.
 - SHELTER frost tender plants by wrapping with burlap. Dog pillow covers do a great job for containers.
 - ADD color spots of cyclamen, cinerarias, dianthus, and primroses available in quantity at your garden center to fill in the blank spots of your winter garden.
 - REUSE large plastic buckets or cardboard boxes as composting bins. Add your table scraps for home made compostable riches.
 - INVITE butterflies and hummingbirds to your garden by planting the bright colors of Buddleia (butterfly bush), Rose of Sharon, and Weigelas now. The butterfly magnet "Lo and Behold Blue Chip" non-invasive buddleia stays under three feet without pruning and blooms non stop from summer to winter.
 - FORCE bulbs indoors. Use a narrow necked vase, poke a few holes in a bulb with toothpicks, fill with water to the base of the bulb, and wait for the roots to form by storing in a dark, cool place for ten to twelve weeks.
 - SAVE rainwater with barrels. Use for indoor plants. For the more adventurous water conscious environmentalists, consider installing a cistern.
 - BRIGHTEN your holiday walls with American botanical art. Before there were plant patents, there were plant portraits.
 - PROLONG the freshness of trimmings indoors by keeping pots out of direct sunlight and away from heat sources.
 - MARVEL at the wild turkeys trotting through your property. Wild turkeys are capable of instant take off and can fly as swiftly as 50 miles per hour. They don't fly for long, but they accelerate quickly. They seem to love my pistache berries.
 - DONATE time, resources, and money to a local charity making a difference in our neighborhoods. You'll feel great while contributing to the spirit of paying it forward.
 - CELEBRATE local viticulture with a bottle of wine from grape growers in the Lamorinda Wine Growers Association, www.lamorindawinegrowers.com
 - GIVE gifts from the garden and watch the love grow.
 - PLANT seeds of gratitude for the gift of life.
- Reuse, refresh, recycle, rejuvenate, and rejoice. Wishing everyone a splendid home grown holiday of celebration and gratitude for all our blessings. We'll reconnect next year!
Happy Gardening to You.

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My virtual door is always open. I am available as a speaker and consultant. Feel free to contact me.

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