

Published December 4th, 2013

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian Winter Wonders

By Cynthia Brian



Chestnuts on a horse chestnut tree are not edible! They are poisonous.

land that feed our bodies while clothing our spirits with beauty, fragrance, and spiritual wellness. As the earth settles down for its winter nap, we also slow our pace in our outdoor spaces to begin preparations for the holiday celebrations and a new year.

In order to sleep peacefully and dream of our gardens, we have to think about safety first. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission over 10,000 people visit emergency rooms during the holidays due to decorating injuries from falls, burns, cuts, and shocks. More than 200 fires are started each year because of dried out trees.

Every tree is the perfect tree at Christmas, especially if you have children who choose. To put the magic in your winter wonderland while keeping your family secure and protected, here are a few suggestions.

- Find the freshest tree to light up your yuletide. Whether you cut it yourself, or buy it from your favorite lot, look for a tree with green needles that are difficult to pull from the branch. The tree's bottom needs to be sticky with resin and needles should not fall off when the tree is shaken.
- Keep all trees, branches, and flammable decorations away from fireplaces, radiators, and high traffic areas.
- Hang stockings on chimneys only when there is no fire burning.
- Buy new lights that have been tested by the Underwriters Laboratory (UL). Make sure that lights for your garden are labeled as outdoor capable. All lights need good wiring, devoid of any broken or cracked sockets, frayed wires, or loose connections. Only use extension cords that are designed for the outdoors and beware of the number of light sets that may be attached.
- Never add electric lights to metallic ornamentations as you could be exposing yourself to electrocution.
- When climbing ladders, use the buddy system.

Besides the conifers that beckon Santa's visit, fruit bearing trees provide wondrous gifts of nature during December. Persimmons, quince, chestnuts, and pomegranates offer exotic flavors for holiday gastronomy. The delicious and juicy Hachiya persimmon is the perfect fruit to flavor many holiday dishes, including Christmas puddings and fruitcakes. These beautiful pointed persimmons resemble bright orange ornaments hanging on the bare branches. If they are firm when picked, allow them to sit on a plate on the counter until soft. They can then be enjoyed raw or cooked, but only when they are mushy. On the other hand, the Fuyu persimmon is flat, hard, and delicious eaten like an apple or sliced into salads. Once it gets soft, it can also be used in dishes that suggest Hachiya. When planting persimmons, keep in mind that it may take up to 10 years for a bountiful yield.

Another tree that is offering holiday bounty is the quince. This hard fruit resembling an ugly apple was a sign of love and commitment in ancient Rome. In Greek mythology, quince was the gift from Aphrodite, the goddess of love. It has been speculated that the forbidden fruit that tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden was actually the quince, although quince is inedible raw. When cooked, the aroma smells like rose petals, and the color of the flesh turns amber. The taste is a combination of pear and apple. Mixed with cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg, quince is heavenly. The fruit is popular in Middle Eastern meat stews as well as British tarts and preserves.

"Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose" are the popular lyrics from the Christmas song that conjures up images and happy memories of bygone holiday seasons. On the branch, the chestnut is encompassed inside a prickly shell that looks like a small yellow tennis ball with spikes. When the shell opens, out

falls a shiny brown nut. For those who grow chestnuts, now is the time to gather the fallen fruit. Slit the skin with a serrated knife (use caution as the shell is tough), blanch, roast, wrap in a cloth for five minutes before eating. BEWARE: the nuts from horse chestnuts and buckeyes are poisonous. They look like chestnuts but are not edible to humans or animals.

Pomegranates have symbolized hope, prosperity, fertility, and eternal life for over 4,000 years. Today they are heralded as a 'superfood,' low in calories, high in antioxidants, vitamin C, potassium, and fiber. When planted in a sunny location, the small 6- to 12-foot tree is easy to grow with green glossy foliage and pretty orange flowers in summer and fall. When the fruit is red it is ripe and ready to be eaten raw. Cut the crown to remove the yellow pith while scoring the skin in quarters. Immerse the scored fruit in a large bowl of cold water. Holding the fruit under the water, break it into sections. The seeds will fall to the bottom of the bowl. Drain, dry, and enjoy.

Be prepared for sticker shock when you purchase any of these Christmas treats. Persimmons and pomegranates cost \$2-4 each in the produce aisle. Perhaps it's time to write a letter to Ole' St. Nick to put in a request for these special trees or other garden gadgets. What do you want or need for your garden? A gazing ball, purple rhododendron, pair of shears, birdbath, a money tree? He's making a list and checking it twice. December is the month for dreams to come true. Tie your Christmas to the outdoors. Let there be light!

Peace on earth. Good will to all. Be a child again on Christmas morning. May your stockings be filled with the seeds of winter wonders, hope, and love.

Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for December

"Christmas is not in tinsel, lights, and outward show. The secret lies in an inner glow." - Wilfred Peterson, "The Art of Living"

What would the holidays be without the high voltage displays of thousands of twinkling lights illuminating our landscapes? We drive around neighborhoods oohing and aahing at the inflatable snowmen waving to us, Santa's sleigh on the rooftops tethered to his blinking reindeer, and flickering candy canes hanging from tree branches. The festival of lights is upon us as we hark the heralded angels and remember the reason for the season. Light a fire in your heart and shine brightly with love. Tidy your garden, then, enjoy the merriment.

- CONSIDER purchasing a living Christmas tree instead of a cut one. Garden centers have a selection of cypress, pine, fir, and even rosemary clipped to resemble a Christmas tree. Place your

- tree in a beautiful copper container, or wrap with festive fabric. Live trees will survive year after year and prices are reasonable.

- FERTILIZE shrubs and trees after all the leaves have fallen to provide food to last for the season.

- RAKE the over abundance of leaves in your gardens to add to the compost pile.

- SURROUND yourself with colorful orchids or amaryllis to chase away the winter blues.

- PLANT pansies, violas, and cyclamen to brighten your beds.

- ADD texture and drama to your indoor decor with spiky long lasting bromeliads.

- INCORPORATE plenty of organic matter into new beds that you are preparing for spring. Double dig to ensure the best results.

- CLEAN garden equipment, patio furniture, and remove leaves from water features. Sharpen shears and oil your tools to protect them from rusting.

- SERVICE mowers and tillers to avoid the spring rush.

- PRUNE dormant fruit trees including peach, apricot, prune, plum, apple, and pear. Save the wood for barbecues next summer.

- CUT any dead or damaged branches from all trees and shrubs.

- CHECK any stakes or ties on smaller trees to make sure they are sturdy enough to withstand strong winter winds.

- WINTERIZE your wonderland by pruning and shaping wisteria, honeysuckle, berry bushes, and perennials.

- SORT containers. Move any frost tender pots to a sheltered area.

- CLEAR vegetable beds that have finished cropping.

- SOW cover crops such as alfalfa, lima beans, and peas to increase the nitrogen in your soil.

- PICK persimmons, pomegranates, quince, and lemons to use in displays and holiday cooking.

- CREATE wreaths and garlands from branches of grapevines, redwoods, pines, and other conifers.

- GATHER pinecones, berries, twigs, and grasses to add to your arrangements.

- ATTRACT birds to your backyard throughout the cold months by keeping feeders filled and baths ready.

- DECORATE a sapling with dollar bills to give as the perfect house-warming gift!

- DEADHEAD roses for a final flush of blooms for the New Year.

- ADD sparkle and pizzazz to your porch by spraying your left over pumpkins and gourds gold, silver, or bronze. They'll look like jewels.

- DRINK a glass of tart cherry juice before bedtime to boost your melatonin and help you sleep better. Making a hot valerian tea works wonders too, but don't combine with alcohol or other sedative drugs.

- PUREE mint leaves with garlic and olive oil for a winter fresh pesto to put over pasta, bread, and fish.

- LIGHT up your decorations with battery powered twinkle lights, or other outdoor lights set to timers. Trees trimmed with lights inspire delight.

- PICK carrots for Rudolph and the reindeer, and don't forget to leave yummy persimmon cookies for Jolly St. Nick on Christmas Eve.

Get up, get out, and get growing while you celebrate the holly jolly. Give the greatest gift of all - the light of

love. Believe in the magic and get glowing!

Happy Gardening to You!

(c)2013

Cynthia Brian

The Goddess Gardener

Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com

www.GoddessGardener.com

925-377-7827

I am available as a speaker, designer, and consultant.



Like glittering ornaments, Hachiya persimmons hang on a winter tree.



A live cypress tree in a container is a great replacement for cutting a tree.



On a dreary day, there is nothing better than filling your rooms with orchids.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA