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## June Gardening Guide

By Cynthia Brian



A bricked flowerbed filled with red carpet roses, Asian lilies, and a cast iron lantern. Photos Cynthia Brian

From the street, the white Lamorinda ranch-style house of Michael Curtis belies the magnificence waiting to be discovered beyond the garden gates. A collector of all things cast off and cast iron, Curtis converts salvaged junk into artistic architecture that transforms his garden into an alluring adventure of discovery.

His grandfather founded L. N. Curtis and Sons Fire Protection and Emergency Response Equipment in 1929 and throughout Curtis' life he has accumulated firefighting memorabilia. Curtis' father introduced him to collecting rocks, minerals, glass and old bottles as they explored abandoned mines and ghost towns together. As a boy, one of Curtis' favorite jaunts was hiking the railroad tracks where he'd pick up discarded telegraph insulators. When he'd find anything that was made of cast iron, he was especially excited. All of these treasures were stored and as he traversed the globe as an adult, he added to his compilation. His heartfelt dream was to one day create a secret garden where all of his unusual trinkets would dance with the most

colorful flowers in perfect harmony.

With his love of the English countryside, his first home boasted an English cottage garden, complete with an authentic red phone booth. In 2001, he moved that phone booth along with his beloved remnants from his industrial revolution fascination to a small house on an acre of land filled with diseased and dying trees. After removing 55 eucalyptus trees, Curtis enriched the soil, and without any written plan or design schematic, began work on his inspired masterpiece using his vision and intuition as guides.

Smooth stones lead through a lush lawn to the iron arbor covered in the sunset oranges and reds of Joseph's coat and flanked by white Alba tree roses. Chimes, bells and hummingbird feeders dangle from the arch while a variety of birdhouses perch on poles, nesting birds darting in and out. Rows of telegraph insulators lining the path are accentuated by two hand painted manhole covers, gifts from a trip to Japan. With the flip of a switch, the insulators illuminate like Christmas lights.

Color is a driving force in the garden and the combination of textures and forms is mesmerizing. Curtis built brick retaining walls and planters, filling them with an enormous diversity of rainbow flora including camellias, roses, impatiens, lilies, Daphne, birds of paradise, gerbera daisies, lobelia, salvia, pansies, violets, canna, petunias, daisies, lavender, foxglove, nasturtium and a variety of bushes, boxwoods, and shrubs. The tranquil sounds of cascading water emanate from the nine fountains scattered throughout the property. Whether one turns right or turns left, an eclectic wood or metal gate directs attention to a divergent garden room sectioned by a growing privet fence and festooned with artifacts from Curtis' escapades to estate sales, fairs, salvage yards, and years of walking the rails. He even built a tree house from reclaimed barn wood adding a ladder, an antique loggers saw and vintage signs discovered in the Gold Country. An abandoned test missile rests against the fence awaiting its proper placement.

Gazing balls and a rusted butterfly grace the formal rose garden with the pièce de résistance being the round stepping stones Curtis crafted using a wine barrel ring, concrete, colored glass, rusted tools, horseshoes, and other discarded items that captured his fancy. Fire hydrants, water pumps, street placards, and railroad warning signs dot the landscape as well as inspirational messages.

The result is whimsical, magical, playful and most of all, timeless.

Although his garden is uniquely his refuge, what Curtis adores more than anything is sharing his garden rooms with friends. With a glass of wine in hand, he graciously guides while explaining the stories behind every artifact and every plant. Of course, if one wants to meander alone, he encourages the exploration. There is no worry about getting lost in this maze as every gate has a unique bell so that he can tell where anyone is at any given moment.

I attempted to glean a bit of gardening advice and came away with these tips:

1. Let your unique vision and your imagination be the driving force of a garden design. There are no limits.
2. Anything is art. Display your collections in an appealing manner to evoke conversations and questions. What may be trash to someone else could be a treasure to you.
3. Let color be king. Don't be afraid to razzle dazzle and mix it up.
4. Add grace and relaxation with water elements. Fountains are fabulous.
5. Do the unexpected. (Who would think about showcasing an English telephone booth, a manhole cover in the garden or adding lights to telegraph insulators?)
6. Offer shelter and food for the birds. You can never have too many birdhouses.
7. Don't be afraid to try new plants. If you like it, plant it. If it grows, great. If not, move on. Planting is pure pleasure.
8. Create garden rooms, not just garden beds.

9. Welcome your loved ones to share your oasis with a glass of wine for walking.

Before I left this enchanted setting, I asked Curtis what his plans for the future entailed. Since his right hand helper, Tony, will be retiring next year, he said he is contemplating selling this personal paradise. "Won't you be sad to leave all this beauty behind?" I queried. "Yes, but it's time for me to be off on a new world quest," he said.

At that moment, I could imagine him dashing to the end of the arbor pathway, entering his red English phone booth and, like other super heroes, flying off to rescue another forlorn and forgotten garden.

Happy Gardening and Happy Growing!



A red and blue painted vintage fire hydrant set among the impatiens and plantings.



One of nine fountains in the lush landscape.





Handmade stepping stones anchor the rose garden and flag pole.



Welcome friends to Michael Curtis's Garden Rooms.



Michael Curtis greets Cynthia Brian at the arbor. Notice the red English phone booth at the end of the path.



The kids-only tree house built from reclaimed barn wood and vintage signs.



Densely planted pots, a birdhouse, the swimming pool and outdoor kitchen offer relaxation.



Cactus hang on the lattice while purple petunias and lavender flank the bird bath.



Cynthia Brian enjoyed Curtis' magical garden. Cynthia Brian, The Goddess Gardener, is a New York Times best selling author, actor, radio personality, speaker, media and writing coach as well as the Founder and Executive Director of Be the Star You Are1(r) 501 c3. Tune into Cynthia's Radio show at [www.StarStyleRadio.com](http://www.StarStyleRadio.com) Available for hire for any project. [Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com](mailto:Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com) [www.GoddessGardener.com](http://www.GoddessGardener.com) 925-377-STAR

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

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