

## Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

# Won't you be my neighbor

*"Look for helpers. You will always find those who are helping." – Mister Rogers*



**Under a redwood tree, acid-loving plants flourish including ferns, azaleas, camellias, and rhododendrons.**

**By Cynthia Brian**

After sowing seeds of beets, arugula, Swiss chard and leeks, I sat on my small white wooden bench to watch. Within minutes a black and white king snake slithered by my foot sending shivers up my spine at the sudden surprise yet joy because I know that king snakes keep rattlers away. A tailless baby lizard scampered to a rock to bask in the sunshine, and a chorus of frogs croaked their mating calls, each attempting to outdo the other. Two moths flitted through the nasturtiums, a swarm of honeybees gathered on the rosemary, and a clew of worms tilled the

rich soil. A covey of quail called to one another, landing in my chestnut tree. My vegetable garden was alive with congenial visiting helpers.

For years Fred Rogers modeled the benefits of caring on his award-winning children's program, "Mister Rogers Neighborhood." The root principle of his teachings was to be a good neighbor and find helpers. Having friendly, helpful neighbors is good not only for humans but for plants and animals, too. We are all interdependent on one another for survival. To fully understand how important buddies are, we need to look no further than the kingdom of plants.

In gardening, we call this companion planting. Health and yields are improved when certain plants are grown together. Some plants will attract beneficial insects while others will repel destructive ones. Certain flowers, vegetables, and herbs grown together will produce more beautiful flowers and flavorful edibles than if grown in solitary confinement.

When planning your companion garden, for the team to thrive, it is important to consider these critical requirements. Determine if they enjoy the same type of soil (sandy, loamy, clay, silty, peaty), light exposure (shade, partial shade, full sun, partial sun), water (how much and how often), and pest control.

**Soil:** The ideal garden soil is loam as it is a balanced mixture of sand, silt, and clay with plenty of humus. To improve our clay soil, we need to improve the drainage and lighten the heaviness by adding copious amounts of organic matter. A combination of compost, mulch, and cover crops will enrich the soil, prevent erosion and minimize weed growth.

... continued on next Page



**Dutch iris amidst ferns.**

Photos Cynthia Brian