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Digging Deep with Goddess Gardener, Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



The glorious restful rose garden of Orinda gardener, Steve Giacomi Photos Cynthia Brian

"Do what you can for as long as you can and when you can't, do the next best thing."-Chuck Yeager

Back in 1999 when I was co-authoring what became a New York Times bestseller, "Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul" with Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, and my new writer colleagues, besides the chapters that we penned, over 5,000 submissions were mailed to us from around the world as possible story inclusions. Five of us diligently read every contribution judging the contents on a 1-10 basis, then, after editing and revising the submissions that received an 8, 9, or 10, we sent them to 25 readers from all over the United States for their judgments. It was a long, slow, tedious task that took over two more years because only the very best and most appropriate 101 stories to sow seeds of love, hope, and laughter were destined for publishing.

I remember one very short story that made the final cut that at the time I didn't especially feel was deserving of this carefully curated book. It was titled,

"The Next Best Thing," by Washington gardener and horticultural teacher, Ann Pehl Thomson. She wrote that when her parents reached their 70s, they had difficulties doing the things that they had previously done with ease. Their motto became a quote from test pilot Chuck Yeager, who in 1947 was the first person to break the sound barrier: "Do what you can for as long as you can and when you can't, do the next best thing."

One morning Ann's mom spied her dad lying flat on his stomach under an apple tree. Alarmed, she scurried out to help. When she got closer she saw that he had a trowel in his hand and was weeding. Exasperated, she asked, "What are you doing?" He replied, "The next best thing."

Fast-forward 20 years, and although I am not in my 70s, and still have plenty of spring in my step, I am no spring chicken. I now appreciate fully doing the next best thing. As much as I adore gardening and laboring in the landscape, I have to be more careful and diligent to avoid injuries, aches, pains, bruises, falls and insect bites. The season has barely begun and I've already endured two tick bites, numerous cuts, and a splattering of slips down the slopes. Every rose bush and tree branch reaches out to hug me. Have you experienced similar mishaps in your garden?

How can we stay safe and work in our gardens at every age? Naturally, I have a few tips:

1. Avoid bending, twisting, and stooping by either sitting on the ground or using a stool or chair to pull weeds and do light tilling. I use a pad to sit on the ground, then, scoot around to do my chores. It saves my back from BLT (bending, lifting, twisting).

2. Wear long sleeve shirts and long trousers. This one is hard for me because I come from a long line of bikini gardeners. My preferred clothing when it's warm is to wear my bathing suit or tank top and shorts. Unfortunately, the scratches and bites multiply in this attire.

3. Spray DEET or other bug spray on your clothing and wear a scarf and gloves to deter the biters. I have purchased scarves, shirts, socks, and leggings from Insect Shield (www.insectshield.com) with a technology that was originally developed to protect the United States Military. Their process binds a proprietary permethrin formula tightly to fabric fibers-resulting in effective, odorless insect protection that lasts through seventy-two washings. It repels ticks, mosquitoes, ants, flies, and more. And it works! When I don't wear it, I fall prey.

4. Paint tool handles a bright color. When my hand clipper fell out of its holster into my lush ground cover, the bright red handles were easily discoverable.

5. Buy a box of surgical gloves to wear under your regular gardening gloves. I love the feel of the dirt and the plants, which means I am always removing my gardening gloves. The surgical gloves provide protection and I can still feel my way around.

6. Invest in a pair of good boots with durable, nonslip soles. Use your clogs for simple things like watering, but for the heavy tasks, boots are the answer. On our ranch boots are the required footwear as rattlesnakes may be lurking in the grass. Plus balance is increased with sturdy footwear.

7. Grow vegetables and flowers in raised beds. Besides easier harvesting, when you design your raised beds with tough meshed wire underneath, you'll keep the rodents, rabbits, and other diggers out of your precious treasures.

8. Make paths wider. When I first created my stairways and walkways, they were a narrow 30 inches. I have now redesigned them to be more open, up to four feet wide, allowing me to maneuver easily with my myriad tools and plants.

9. Sport a wide-brimmed hat and an apron with pockets. My straw fire hat keeps the tree leaves out of my hair and my cooking apron keeps my clothes from becoming tattered while allowing me to store my bottle of water in a pocket for rapid rehydrating. A bottle of sunscreen resides in a side pouch for reapplication during my time outdoors.

10. Know when to ask for help. In my youth, I prided myself on doing everything myself from

chopping wood to building stairs up or down steep hillsides to digging trenches for irrigation pipes and carrying hundreds of pounds of rock to create dry riverbeds. Now I'm wiser and ask for assistance with heavy jobs that could present a safety hazard for me.

Gardening enriches our lives in every way. We become physically stronger, mentally more acute, and definitely less stressed. I lose track of time when I'm gardening and a cascade of ideas for various enterprises floods my brain. The bottom line is that being in nature is mandatory for our pleasure and health of body, mind, and spirit. The sounds, smells, and sights of the natural world are soothing and enhance appreciation for life.

Hopefully, like Ann's Dad, I, too, will be found face down with a trowel in hand under a tree digging in my 70s, 80s, 90s, and beyond. Whatever it takes to supplement your abilities, here's permission to do the next best thing!

Cynthia Brian's Mid-Month Gardening Guide for May

CHECK irrigation system for leaks or broken heads. Make sure to test your lawn sprinklers, which could be buried by newly growing grass.

WATER lawns infrequently yet deeply to maintain green space.

BEE CAREFUL as bees are busy pollinating.

WATCH out for gophers, moles, voles and other burrowing pests.

AERATE your lawn allowing oxygen and water to penetrate roots.

CONTINUE to collect and discard fallen camellia blooms until your bush or tree has stopped blooming.

BAIT for snails and slugs.

INHALE the sweet scents of jasmine and roses in full bloom.

EMPTY the water from all containers. Change birdbaths often to keep mosquito larvae from developing.

PRESCRIBE parks instead of pills. Get outside every day in nature.

PLANT deer resistant bearded iris rhizomes in sunny spots for perennial flowering in spring and fall.

They will multiply to allow you to divide and replant elsewhere,

COLLECT dandelion leaves daily from your pesticide-free lawn or garden to add tang to salads and soups.

ADD waterwise succulents to your garden environment.

SPRAY crape myrtles and roses for mildew.

Thank you to everyone who sent comments and compliments about my article on FireScaping. I am happy it is beneficial. If you missed it, you can read it at www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue1305/Digging-Deep-with-Cynthia-Brian-for-May-FireScaping.html

Happy Gardening. Happy Growing.



If space is an issue, shelves of succulents are attractive.



Pick dandelions from an organic lawn and add to salads.



Jasmine perfumes the air and is a great climber.



A hillside of purple bearded iris and California poppies.



Camellias and Chinese fringe set a colorful stage.



Cynthia Brian at sunset amidst the roses and bottle brush. Cynthia Brian, The Goddess Gardener, raised in the vineyards of Napa County, 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 Are!r 501 c3. Tune into Cynthia's Radio show and order her books at www.StarStyleRadio.com. Buy a copy of her books, Growing with the Goddess Gardener, Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul, and Be the Star You Are! Millennials to Boomers at www.cynthiabrian.com/online-store. Hire Cynthia for projects, consults, and lectures. Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com www.GoddessGardener.com Donate to Fire Disaster Relief via Be the Star You Are!r 501 c3 at www.BethestarYouAre.org

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