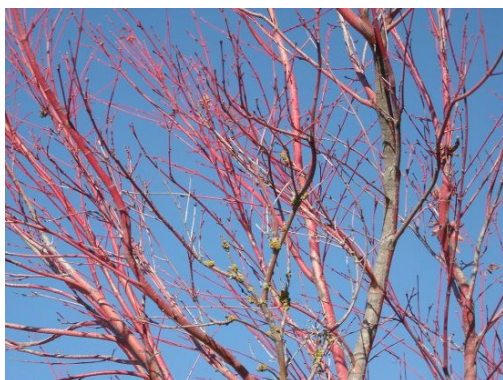


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Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



The naked branches from a red-branched Japanese maple are gorgeous in winter. Photos Cynthia Brian

"Nature gives to every time and season some beauties of its own."

- Charles Dickens

It's the most wonderful time of the year!

Every December I utter these same words and each Christmas seems to come earlier than the previous year. Where do the seconds, minutes, hours, days and years go? When I was a child doing my best to be nice instead of naughty, Christmas took forever to arrive. Today, Rudolph and his sleigh are on fast forward.

We have officially entered the season of winter.

The deciduous trees are bare, the sky is gray, and gardens have gone to bed for a long nap. Poinsettias, cyclamen, narcissi, bottlebrush and red branches of Japanese maples offer hints of bright color amidst the dreary daylight landscapes.

Come nightfall, magic happens. Houses and fountains are illuminated with twinkling lights, cuddly teddy bears line windowsills, and treetops glisten with dangling ornaments. Oh, what fun it is to ride around to

admire the festive luminosities.

Nature has a way of healing itself. With the rainfall, the formerly charred hills of Moraga and Lafayette are turning a verdant green. In the spring poppies will be flourishing as the ground revitalizes from the frightening October fires. Hurray for Mother Nature!

Did you ever see the 1947 movie, "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir" starring Gene Tierney and Rex Harrison? It's a classic film and imminently watchable even by today's standards. What stood out for me in revisiting that movie recently was the mention of a Monkey Puzzle Tree. Although I had traveled to both Argentina and Chile from whence the tree originates, I had never paid it much attention until I visited Butchart Gardens in Canada. I thought it looked like a naturally decorated Christmas tree with its very unique "pine" cones, although it is not related to a pine tree. The proper name is Araucaria Araucana and what makes it so unique are its cones. The male cones look like hanging cucumbers and the female cones resemble round bulbs. The seeds in the cones are edible like pine nuts and consumed by the indigenous population. This national tree of Chile can live to over 1,000 years (Is Santa Claus that old?) and is now on the endangered list. Why is it called a Monkey Puzzle Tree? Evidently, a monkey is unable to climb this tree, thereby puzzling the monkey.

At this time of year, so many delicious smells emanate from the kitchen. Making persimmon pudding from our hachiyas with lots of cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves and other spices is one of our family traditions. I've also been drying sage, bay, oregano and rosemary to use in recipes and give as gifts. The scents of the holidays are gifts to the senses. Make sure to try some new recipes.

Deck your halls, jingle your bells, and rock around your tree. It's the season to be jolly.

Savor the blessings of being with family and friends and have yourself a very merry Christmas.

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Cynthia Brian's End of December Gardening Guide

BRING branches from your evergreen trees inside to use as inexpensive holiday décor. The fresh fragrance gives your home a cozy, festive feeling.

BAIT for snails and slugs.

ADD lights to your bird houses and fountains.

TREAT all acid loving plants with sulfur to lower the soils pH.

DECORATE for the New Year with the red cones of the magnolia tree.

REDUCE erosion by leaving a vegetative cover or stubble from perennials in the soil. The decreased water runoff keeps contaminants like fertilizer and pesticides from our streams.

GIVE a gardening book to a gardener. Gardening books in the winter reminds us that spring will be here soon, so we need to get ready! Whether a master gardener or a novice, there's always something new to learn from "Growing with the Goddess Gardener" or "Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul" (we have

hard-to-find, rare first editions) available at www.CynthiaBrian.com/online-store.

CONTACT Contra Costa Mosquito and Vector Control at (925) 685-9301 or www.ContraCostaMosquito.com for education or if you have a problem with rats, mice, skunks, ticks, yellowjackets, and mosquitoes. The services are free as you've paid for them with your taxes.

PRUNE roses anytime you have time. Don't forget to root canes that you love in potting soil or offer them to other gardeners.

FILL a Santa hat with pinecones to give as a last-minute gift.

FEED the birds by allowing seedpods to form on perennials.

FINISH planting all spring blooming bulbs.

DONATE to your favorite charity. It is the season of giving. Mine, of course, is Be the Star You Are!

(<http://www.bethestaryouare.org>)

RIDE around the town to admire all the holiday ornamentations of decorated houses and gardens.

THANKS for another great year together, gardening, laughing, inspiring and reading.

Happy Gardening. Happy Growing. Happy Christmas to all and to all a Good Night!



The endangered Monkey Puzzle tree looks like a Christmas tree. Photos Cynthia Brian



This must be where Santa and Mrs. Claus live with their elves. Photos Cynthia Brian



Fragrant narcissi in full bloom backed by the fading roses. Photos Cynthia Brian



Cut a branch from a magnolia tree with red cones for a New Year decoration. Photos Cynthia Brian



On a sunny wintery day, bottlebrush shines brightly.



A festive fountain is lit for Christmas.



Cynthia Brian loves the glitter of the holidays.

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 StarStyler Radio Broadcast at www.StarStyleRadio.com. Buy a copy of her books, *Growing with the Goddess Gardener* and *Be the Star You Are! Millennials to Boomers* at www.cynthiabrian.com/online-store. Hire Cynthia for writing projects, garden consults, and inspirational lectures. Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com
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