

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian, the Goddess Gardener, for August

The Dog Days of Summer



Photo Cynthia Brian

Shine with succulents as they add texture and form to a garden.

When the pail is full, pour into a 3 x 3 x 3-foot enclosure in an out-of-the-way area or buy a compost tumbler. If you have chickens or rabbits, add their manure to the batch. If you made a pile, with a pitchfork, turn the compost regularly. Keep the contents damp, and when the compost turns crumbly with a texture of a chocolate cake, it is ready. Add it to your flowerbeds as a fertilizer, moisture retainer, and soil enricher.

Although we want to discourage our furry friends from munching on our plants, if you want a beautiful flowering plant that is not harmful to indoor pets, look no further than orchids. My spotted

mauve phalaenopsis orchid has been blooming continuously for the past four years. Orchids are trouble-free and undemanding. Just leave them alone, put an ice cube once a week in their container, and let them beautify your home. Outdoors, begonias are now gorgeously in full bloom and they are toxic to all animals.

Our dogs watch us eat and they may be inclined to want to join the party. Use caution and knowledge when feeding your canine anything but dog food. Grapes will be ripening in the next few weeks but as delicious as they are for humans, don't be tempted to feed any to your dog. Grapes can be toxic to a dog, damaging the kidneys, and for some, even eating one grape could be fatal. Beets and cucumbers are ready to be harvested along with tomatoes, peppers, eggplants and numerous herbs. If you plant tomatoes in a large pot with parsley and basil, you can move the container to follow the sun. In small amounts, ripe tomatoes (not green, too much solanine), cucumbers, peppers (specifically red), and eggplants can contribute to a healthy immune system for your dog. Consult your veterinarian before dispensing any fruit or vegetable to your pet.

Summer is the time to pick and dry fresh herbs to be savored all year. Home-grown herbs have more flavor than store-bought varieties. If your dog has bad breath, a sprig of mint or parsley will remedy the odor.

It's easy to dry your own by following these simple steps.

Drying Herbs

1. Harvest herbs in the morning after the dew has dried. Make sure to pick herbs before they begin to flower. Flowers can be used in all food preparations, but to save your herbs, it's best to have foliage, not flowers.
2. Make a clean cut using a sharp shear. Don't pull herbs or you may disturb the entire plant.
3. Rinse in cool water, pat with a towel.
4. Choose a hot, dark and dry spot where temperatures will be 80 degrees or higher without any humidity. A garage, shed, attic, porch, or even a closet can work. Light degrades the essential oils, thus, make sure the area will be dark.
5. For large leaf herbs such as basil and mint, the best drying method is to place the stems on a rack or screen to allow for air circulation. A window screen works great.
6. For small to medium-sized leaves such as parsley, sage, thyme, dill or cilantro, gather into bunches of a dozen stems and hang from the rafters. Don't hang herbs in the kitchen as steam and the brightness will destroy your craft.

Most herbs only take a week to three weeks to dry perfectly. They can then be put in airtight jars or canisters and stored for future use. Dried herbs make excellent gifts for a cook who is a non-gardener, too. Most herbs are a healthy additive for dogs, but, again, always consult with your vet first.

Although the dog days of summer are over, you still have time to romp with Rover and watch the twinkling Dog Star in the predawn darkness. Sirius will be the brightest star in the heavens for the next 210,000 years shining with glints of red and blue sparkles!

Happy gardening. Happy growing.