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Digging Deep with Goddess Gardener, Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



Azaleas do well in shady areas and will bloom profusely. Photos Cynthia Brian

"I was reared in the garden, you know." ~ Emily Dickenson

If you are like most people who have been hibernating and following CDC social distancing protocols during the pandemic, you are probably itching for a gathering of friends and family. If you have been vaccinated (and, I hope you have), small outdoor get-togethers without masks are considered relatively safe.

Is your garden and patio area ready for a party? While many people have baked bread, learned to crochet, or tackled puzzles, I have been busy helping clients prepare their landscapes for small garden shindigs as well as creating quiet spaces as a peaceful, restorative sanctuary.

You don't have to do an entire expensive makeover to make your place look pretty and presentable. There are several ways to get a streamlined look on a budget that you can afford.

I call these "garden hacks" and I'll share

suggestions with you.

Walk around your exterior perimeter and take notes. What areas need more TLC? Do you have debris anywhere or everywhere? What about weeds, broken or dead branches, or an overabundance of fallen leaves? The first thing you want to do is clean. Remove whatever is broken and not fixable, recycle or repurpose other items. Rake the leaves and put them in the compost pile or green bin. With pruning shears, cut any dead branches on shrubs or trees and remove dead or dry foliage.

Next, tackle the weeds. If weeds are growing in beds, it is best to pull them by hand. If they are on a hillside or area without many other plants, you might be able to use a weed-eater. My preference is always hand-pulling to get the roots. Pulling out the roots ensures that they won't sprout again this season.

Once your garden is free of weeds, check the soil. If it is hard and compacted, it behooves you to bring in bags of enriched compost before planting. Soil is the foundation of verdant growth. With our glorious spring weather, blooming flowers, trees, and shrubs are in abundance at nurseries and garden centers. Before it gets too hot, you'll want to add any shrubs or color spots. Until plantings are established, you will need to water deeply and often. I prefer to plant colorful perennials, biennials, and bulbs that will return in future seasons. Some of my favorites are azaleas, foxgloves, delphinium, lavender, roses, and calla lily, all available in several colors. To soften a fence or arbor, I recommend clematis, honeysuckle, or jasmine. Wisteria is a strong, spreading vine that requires heavy-duty support systems. Also, seek drought-tolerant species and succulents. In my garden, I like to create a painter's palette of color with minimal spacing between plants, however, strategically placing just a few select plants is impressively impactful.

Ornamental grasses are easy to care for and add a natural stream-like flow to a garden. Clumping bamboo is excellent as a rustling screen that blows in the breeze. Both offer a feeling of serenity and calmness to any space.

After you have planted, you'll want to top-dress with mulch to enhance the aesthetics, increase moisture retention, and minimize weed growth. You can buy wood chips in at least three different colors: red, black, and forest brown by the bag or you can order other varieties in bulk. Any flammable mulches such as chips, bark, straw, or pine needles must be distanced two feet from structures as per the fire ordinance. Gravel or rocks can be placed around the structure as a preventive measure.

Add steppingstones surrounded by small pebbles or pea gravel to enhance a dirt path. Gravel and rocks add texture, and the crunching sound is soothing. If your porch or deck needs refinishing and that project is not in your current plan or budget, buy inexpensive indoor/outdoor carpeting or rugs in natural tones to temporarily cover the flaws and make walking comfortable and splinter-free.

When it comes to patio furniture, take an inventory of the condition of what you have. Can it last another summer with a bit of cleaning and updating? Do you need new pillows and pads, or can you just wash and refresh the ones you own? I recently worked on a project where the homeowners were going to discard their table and chairs because they were rusting. Their dilemma was that they didn't have the time nor the money to invest in new patio furniture before a scheduled garden get-together for a few vaccinated friends. My suggestion was to use a little elbow grease: scrub, sand, and spray-paint. It took only a couple of hours, and the result was that the set looked brand new. Painting is one of the greatest hacks offering immediate, inexpensive results.

Another hack that I employ regularly is adding cut seafoam static to area pots or beds where a little pizzazz is needed. Bunches of straw-like static will hold their purple color for weeks without additional water. Shaded areas with comfortable seating invite a cooling, quieting, and relaxing experience. Umbrellas add sophistication to a patio and two or three strips of vintage-looking LED Edison-bulb lighting to provide a warm inviting glow in the evening. Lay a row of tube lights on the ground behind hedges for ethereal illumination.

The smart choice when planning the party bites is to offer individually cupped appetizers to eliminate

people double-dipping. Home-grown (or farmers' market) carrots, celery, and peppers cut into long slices standing on top of hummus in tiny tableware mount a pretty display as well as a nutritious one. Cones with charcuteries adorned with springs of rosemary, orange slices, and berries will entice any carnivore. For drinks, individual bottles or cans of favorite beverages will quench thirsty friends. Glasses can be marked with the names of the guests.

Finally, fresh, free-flowing flower arrangements picked from a profusion of blooms from your garden will be a conversation starter. The ones I created for the event were a mixture of calendula, Jupiter's beard, Mexican sage, mixed with mock orange which added a heady perfume to the outdoor occasion. After the festivities, the bouquets became fragrant favorites indoors.

I was reared in the garden and am proud of being a nature lady. By using these simple hacks, you are ready to host your outdoor garden party with your vaccinated friends. Give it your best shot!

Happy Gardening. Happy Growing.

REMINDERS

- Compliance deadline for wildfire risk is June 1. Make sure to cut your tall grasses, prune tree limbs to a minimum of six feet from the ground and away from roofs. Keep two feet of combustible ground covers including bark or mulch away from structures. Gravel is a good medium to use in this area. Also, plantings need to have a one-foot clearance above the ground. Clean out gutters and roof area of debris. Trim trees away from chimneys and remove flammable liquids and other matter away from your home.

- Once your daffodils, tulips, woodland hyacinths, and Naked ladies' foliage have dried, remove them from the plant. By allowing the leaves to yellow, the plant is receiving its nutrition to develop flowers for the next season. The leaves can be added to the compost pile.

- Keep a bucket in your shower and use the water on your indoor plants.

- Empty all outdoor vessels of standing water. Even a teacup saucer will breed mosquitoes.

- Snakes are now out and about. Garter, King, and gopher snakes are great friends to our gardens.



Calla lilies are elegant and flower annually. Photos Cynthia Brian



Purple statice fills the back of a former solar light pelican Photos Cynthia Brian



The former dirt path is improved with black pebbles, steppingstones, and lined with mulch. Photos Cynthia Brian



As a highlight to your vaccinated outdoor gathering, make charcuterie cones with a slice of orange and a sprig of rosemary. Photos Cynthia Brian



Before planting, no mulch sedona garden



After planting sedona garden



The repainted table holds a loose arrangement picked from the garden: calendula, Mexican sage, Jupiter's beard, and mock orange blossoms.



Sliced celery, peppers, and carrots in an individual cup of hummus are a tasty appetizer.



A blue clematis is a great addition to a fence or arbor.



Cynthia Brian in the spring garden with yellow freesias and blue woodland hyacinths
Cynthia Brian, The Goddess Gardener, is available for hire to help you prepare for your spring garden. Raised in the vineyards of Napa County, Cynthia 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 copies of her best-selling books, including, Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul, Growing with the Goddess Gardener, and Be the Star You Are! Millennials to Boomers at www.cynthiabrian.com/online-store. Receive a FREE inspirational music DVD. Hire Cynthia for writing projects, garden consults, and inspirational lectures.

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