

Published October 27th, 2021

Digging Deep with Goddess Gardener, Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



Decorate your front porch with pumpkins and chrysanthemums. Photos Cynthia Brian

"Gnome and elf and fairy, Witch and ghost make merry
On this last of dear October's days." ~ Lettie. C. Van
Derveer, Halloween Happenings, 1921

The howling, nipping, and barking of the coyote send shivers down my back. Although they hunt throughout the day, as dusk settles over the hills and the moon rises, these wily carnivores set out to regulate the ecosystem. As apex crepuscular predators in an urban landscape, their prey is often our beloved pet. Creepy and blood-curdling!

For kids, the hot topic of conversation this week revolves around Halloween. As we decorate pumpkins and light jack-o'-lanterns, spooky specimens and wild phantoms are also prowling around our hallowed grounds.

We work hard to maintain our landscapes and it's frustrating to have our sanctuaries invaded by unwanted organisms. One of the most noxious weeds to assault our gardens is the bindweed. Mimicking the fair face of a

morning glory flower, like a poltergeist, it twists and tangles until it strangles plants and shrubs. Each plant produces more than 50 seeds that can survive for 50 years or more, making this deep-rooted gremlin a wicked weed to eradicate.

The cast list of freaky wild ones includes the misunderstood good, the beastly bad, and the pesky players that we often wish to hocus pocus somewhere else.

The Misunderstood Good

Owls

Owls are the silent, stealthy hunters of our gardens providing free rodent control. When you hear their haunting hoots, be grateful that they've designated your trees as their habitat. Install a tall owl nesting box if you don't have old trees attractive to owls.

Frogs and Toads

In folkloric traditions, magic potions are concocted in rituals using frogs and toads to cast evil spells. These helpful hoppers have been much maligned. As a natural pest controller, they will munch over 10,000 insects in a few months. Their summer song and mating calls are melodious, indicating that you have a healthy environment. Turn a broken clay pot on its side, bury it halfway in the soil, and welcome these amphibians to their toad abode.

Bats

Dracula and the coronavirus have something in common . they both disparaged the docile bat. Bats are not winged rodents or bloodsuckers. Instead, they are the only flying mammals with wings. Bats are productive pest patrollers feeding on insects, progressive pollinators of hundreds of plant species, and sensational seed dispersers.

These flying friends don't plague people, but they will devour a thousand mosquitoes in an hour. Provide habitat for these winged heroes to roost by erecting a bat house 12 to 15 feet off the ground. As a bonus to your garden, they'll offer nutrient-rich fertilizer with their excrement, guano. If you fear vampires, plant garlic.

Snakes

Snakes are slimy, slithering, and scary. But most snakes are harmless and helpful garden assistants. The common garter snake preys on insects, slugs, and rodents and prefers to live in cool, dark places. Keep your doors closed as it would be frightening to find that a female gave birth to up to 50 live young under your bed! The elegant kingsnake is welcome in any landscape as it eats venomous snakes like the rattlesnake or copperhead as well as rodents and other plant destroyers.

Skunks

Skunks are the garbage collectors of the garden. These docile black and white creatures will eat anything including insects, rodents, and yellow jacket larvae. When fruit falls from a tree, they'll be the clean-up crew. Pet food and birdseed are attractors. Because of their odorous spray, these mostly nocturnal, solitary, and non-confrontational creatures get a bad rap. When threatened, they'll stomp, hiss, and puff up before raising their tail and unleashing their potent defense system.

Spiders

Little Miss Muffet had no reason to run away. Only unwanted insects such as grasshoppers, aphids, cockroaches, and mosquitoes need to fear these valuable web weavers. Research is underway by scientists on the benefits of spider venom to prevent arthritis while the strength of spider silk is inspiring mechanical engineers.

The Beastly Bad

Gophers, Moles, Voles

Although we witness the horror gophers, moles, and voles create in our lawns and yard, we rarely see these creeping critters. Stomping on the mounds, trails, and holes may distract them for a while, but like

the Terminator, they'll be back. Setting multiple traps and checking them daily is the best method. If all else fails, call in the pros.

Rats and Mice

Rats and mice gnaw through wiring, wood, pipes, bags of birdseed, and make nests in our stored patio furniture pads. Reproducing rapidly and prolifically, rats spread disease, contaminate food sources, and infest our homes and gardens. In just three years, a single rat can produce half a billion descendants! Trapping is the humane manner to eradicate these pests unless the wicked witch of the West unleashes her feral black cats to hunt and exterminate.

Raccoons

If you are hearing scratching noises in your attic, it's not the walking dead. You could have rodents or raccoons. Raccoons will walk on a tree branch to access your roof and set up a den in the spaces above your ceiling. They also are attracted to garbage, pet food, bird feeders, bird nests, and they kill poultry. Raccoons are major hosts of rabies in the United States. Make sure to cut your tree branches back at least six to eight feet from your roof to protect yourself from these masked marauders as well as from fire laddering. Deter raccoons from setting up house with cayenne pepper sprinkled wherever needed and spray your shrubs and bushes with a solution of a bottle of hot sauce mixed with water.

Wild Boars

Wild boars destroy yards, damage fences, and are a danger to humans. The destruction of property by feral hogs costs agriculture over \$1.5 billion annually. They compete with wildlife for food and negatively impact our natural ecosystem, increasing soil erosion and decreasing water quality. Their trampling, rooting, and digging have devastated numerous lawns and gardens locally. Wild hogs are a horror show.

Pesky Players

Squirrels, deer, and turkeys are a nuisance to homeowners.

Squirrels

Bushy-tailed squirrels strip fruit and vegetables from trees and vines before it is harvest time and often take up residence in homes. I've witnessed squirrels scampering on my fence with an apple from my tree that was bigger than his head. They have denuded my pistache trees of their unripe berries and stolen all the chestnuts from the trees. Nevertheless, I enjoy their aerial antics and circus acrobatics as well as their lively chatter.

Deer

Deer demolish gardens with their dining desires. The only sure way to keep them away from your sacred spaces is to build a tall fence enclosing your property. Since my garden is fenced and protected, I welcome the doe and her twin fawns on their daily 6:30 p.m. visit to graze on my grassy slope. Sometimes the stags sharpen their antlers on my oaks and often leave me a gift of them.

Turkeys

Turkeys fly over those fences to forage for berries, bugs, and buds. Living in my pines, I sometimes have as many as two dozen gobbling and scratching. I've watched how they share the bounty of their discoveries with some of the birds shaking branches to release fruit to their young waiting below.

Elves, fairies, and gnomes are invited to roam my haunted garden to protect and serve. If you get an infestation of any of the "beastly bad" or when the "pesky players" are bewitching and injurious to your property, it may behoove you to call in the ghostbusters, also known as licensed depredators for nuisance wildlife control. R.I.P.

Spooky Shrubs

Ending this article on a lighter note, if you are looking for an all-black bush to showcase for Halloween, Proven Winners developed a crapemyrtle called Center Stage Red that boasts jet black leaves with stunning summer red blooms. I'm partnering this black beauty with a heat-tolerant gardenia, Steady as She Goes. Shrubs with names that evoke goosebumps include Ghost Weigela, Abracadabra Hydrangeas, and Handsome Devil Viburnum.

As October comes to an end, I wish you zombie thrills, frights, and chills. May the grim reapers stay away from your garden. Charge up your broomsticks and have a very happy, safe Halloween.

Happy gardening. Happy growing. Trick or Treat!



Plant garlic to keep vampires away. Photos Cynthia Brian



Cattails are great for fall arrangements. Photos Cynthia Brian



Bindweed is a wicked weed resembling morning glory that must be eliminated. Photos Cynthia Brian



A glittering pumpkin. Photos Cynthia Brian



A Kingsnake is a friend, not foe.



The left-over cat food enticed this skunk to the patio.



A chatty squirrel eats the berries at the top of a pistache tree.



Proven Winners two new releases, jet-black leafed crapemyrtle, and a sun tolerant gardenia



The devilish looking gulf fritillary caterpillar on the 'Witchcraft' passion vine.



Cynthia Brian and a ghoul. 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 books, including, Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul, Growing with the Goddess Gardener, and Be the Star You Are! www.cynthiabrian.com/online-store. Receive a FREE inspirational music DVD and special savings. Hire Cynthia for writing projects, garden consults, and inspirational lectures. Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com www.GoddessGardener.com

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