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Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



A whimsical corner featuring wagon wheels, butterflies, and a grand mixture of petunias, roses, geraniums, sweet William, iris, and more. Photo Cynthia Brian

In My Sister's Garden-A Wistful Romp through a Drought-Resistant Oasis

"Spring is the time of the year, when it is summer in the sun and winter in the shade." - Charles Dickens

One of the great things about growing up on a farm in the boondocks is that your tribe is your family. We five siblings were as thick as thieves as we climbed trees, worked the fields, pulled fences, drove tractors, branded cattle, and planted the spring garden. We played, we quarreled, and we dug in the dirt together. By the time May arrived, we ached to get our hands grubby in the vegetable patch. Waiting for the vegetables to sprout and be harvested taught us patience and responsibility. Of course, Mom's beautiful flower gardens would already be in bloom by this time of year getting us into constant trouble because we were forever picking bouquets not only for her, but, for teachers, 4-H leaders, and Sunday masses.

As we grew into adults, our love of the earth grew as well. Following in the big shoes of my father, my brother continued the family tradition of being a farmer and has one of the most beautiful

vineyards in the county. Our mother's love of gardening instructed the gardens of her girls.

Recently I walked with my sister Debbie through her eclectic garden. There is a saying that "you can take the girl out of the country, but you can never take the country out of the girl." With Deb, she's never left the land where we were born. She is a country cowgirl through and through. She's always adorned with her cowboy hat, rodeo belt buckle, and boots! She hunts, fishes, grows her food, and would have relished being a pioneer in the 1870s.

Debbie and her husband are the ultimate recyclers and repurposers. With their barnyard of adopted animals - pigs, goats, donkeys, chickens, even Texas long horns at one time - all the weeds and garden cuttings feed the animals and the manure is then recycled back to the garden. They collect rooftop rain runoff in used wine barrels then pipe it to a storage tank to help with summer watering. It's never enough, but every drop helps. Their garden art includes rusted plows, wooden swings, a plethora of homemade birdhouses, multiple fountains made from found objects, wagon wheels, antlers, the cutest country chicken coop you ever did see, and a sleeping shed outfitted with a bear hide, antique fishing gear, pinecones, and found treasures of every sort. From their patio they watch the wildlife on their hillside property - deer, bobcats, raccoons, turkeys, skunks, and the occasional mountain lion. It's a playful, restful garden setting, albeit with a watchful eye for the rattlesnakes that enjoy this oasis as well.

What I love about Debbie's garden is how it reflects her unique personality, her love of the land, and her admiration for the history of the Wild West. As we ambled around the property with her happy dogs in the lead, the songbirds sang, a bevy of butterflies delicately landed on her flowers, and the koi in the pond swam to the surface to greet me. This time together immersed in this sustainable landscape nurtured my soul and brought our childhood memories to vivid life. Although we grow the same plants, shrubs, trees, and succulents in both of our yards, our designs and esthetics are completely different. And that's the beauty of creating a garden, making it your

own special paradise where you can find peace, tranquility, and restoration in tandem with the wild kingdom.

Tips to Creating Your Own Unique Playground

Don't over-think it! Make lists of everything you enjoy in a garden then do it.

Be conservation conscious as well as considerate of nature.

Be creative. Think swathes, angles, circles, and flow. There is nothing more boring than a box.

The hardscape must include natural materials: rocks, gravel, barn wood, shells, or anything meaningful to you.

Instead of buying art, repurpose childhood toys, old sinks, even a commode overflowing with flowers can be comical.

Be playful. When you are going to spend time in the outdoors, you want to enjoy yourself.

Allow your personality to shine.

Add surprises, secret gardens, hedged rooms, anything that will enhance the whimsical and magical element to your garden experience.

Lead to a focal point or view with meandering paths, walkways, and trails.

Invite the pollinators; bees, butterflies, and birds by providing housing, nectar flowers, protection, fountains, and ponds.

Mix it up. For a drought resistant garden, consider an array of beautiful succulents, cactus, lavender, bulbs, iris, daylily, geraniums, and other plants that will add color, texture, form, and structure, yet require little maintenance and minimal water.

A potager, pots, or area designated for edibles and herbs is a must have. There is nothing better than picking your dinner from your own property.

Benches, swings, lounge chairs, umbrellas, and places to unwind, watch the clouds, savor sunsets, and marvel at the stars make your garden your home.

What's so fun about our family gardening experience is the sharing that we all do in giving each other clips, snips, cuttings, bulbs, and volunteers. We grow the same specimens and as we stroll and admire our handiwork, we can't remember who gave what to whom first.

As I said farewell to my sister, she handed me a hand-painted tin filled with blooming echeveria from clippings I had given her a few years before. We shared a laugh.

The circle of life continues.

Happy Trails to you.

Cynthia Brian's Mid-Month Fresh Ideas

CHECK irrigation lines and sprinkler systems for leaks. The water district reminds us that our California drought is not over yet!

RELEASE ladybugs into your garden if you spot aphids. Ladybugs (also called lady beetles) only stay in a garden when there is sufficient food. If yours fly away, don't be dismayed. Pat yourself on the back as your garden is healthier than a neighboring landscape.

TUCK edibles into your flowerbeds. Parsley and garlic chives look especially handsome as a border.

REGROW scallions by sticking the root ends in water after snipping. You'll get a fresh crop very quickly.

SCATTER wildflower seeds in an area where you want a wild, natural appearance. It's not too late!

HARVEST overwintered root crops such as carrots and parsnips before they lose their flavor and robustness.

THIN apples and stone fruit to insure a bigger, healthier harvest. Leave two to three fruit per cluster.

Happy gardening. Happy growing!



The antique plow with the cowpoke couple greets visitors.



A winding gravel path dotted with bearded iris, lavender, and fruit trees leads to the bucolic hillside view.



Aeonium succulents Photos Cynthia Brian



An antique plow with a recycled wooden swing is a special place to enjoy sunsets.





Edible and fascinating, Debbie cultivated a living fence of prickly pear cactus.



A wine barrel collects roof runoff.



Cynthia's mother, sister cowgirl Debbie, and Cynthia in the garden.

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