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Happy Gardening to You!

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Digging Deep-Gardening with Cynthia

By Cynthia Brian



Photos Cynthia Brian

Perched along the creek in my meditation meadow, I sit on the rickety white wicker chair listening to the tinkling of the running water. I am filled with anticipation for the beauty of the forthcoming spring as the creeping blue vinca major tickle my toes. Today the weather is mild. I inhale the fragrance of the freesias while admiring the fields of multi-colored daffodils and cerulean lupines. The timid tulips and iridescent Dutch iris are just beginning to unfurl their magnificence. The bountiful blossoms adorning the fruit trees in my orchard hint of the abundant harvest to come.

Yes, I admit, I have a very bad case of spring fever and am itching to get my hands deep in the dirt. Although I thank God we've had buckets of rain throughout February and March to quench the thirst of a drought parched earth, I'm ready to exchange my muddy boots and rain slicker for my clogs and shorts. The words of Tom Waits filter through my meandering mind, "November has tied me to an old tree. Get word to April to rescue me!"

If you are ready to be rescued from the winter blahs and need a prescription for spring fever, I have a sure cure. Besides starting seeds indoors, I propose preparing for the warm weather ahead by planning our garden areas. Have you ever taken the time to discover what you really want in your landscape? During April and May, Bay area organizations host a variety of garden tours. These are

great places to gather ideas for your own backyard. You'll have the opportunity to talk with other like-minded gardeners as well as take photos to remind you of the special ingredients you observe. Check out the side bar for events in Lamorinda.

In the meantime, you can begin contemplating your new landscape designs. Whether you are a do-it-yourselfer or you prefer to hire a professional, I've compiled a handy questionnaire to help you create the garden of your dreams.

To get started, you'll need a notebook, a computer, or better yet a garden journal. Ask yourself the following questions and record the responses. It is imperative that you be honest and accurate with your answers to insure the best results.

1. How large is your outdoor space?
2. Do you want to design or redesign the front, sides, and back yard? Are you starting from scratch, or will you have to remove old plantings and debris to create something new?
3. What types of hardscapes do you want to incorporate? Examples would be patios, walls, gazebos, trellises, pergolas, gates, decks, fences, pathways, waterfalls, ponds, fountains, sheds, pool house, conservatory, stone, brick, concrete, etc.
4. What kind of garden space are you envisioning? Do you prefer English gardens, formal landscapes, cottage gardens, serene Asian styles, natural native plantings, or something entirely eclectic?
5. Is there a color scheme you'd like to maintain? I always advocate bringing the inside out and the outside in. What are your preferred color choices?
6. How much maintenance are you willing to enjoy or endure? Explain in detail if you are willing to do the heavy work or you want to spend only a minimal amount of time planting, pruning, and caring for your new yard? There is no right answer here except what works for you.
7. Do you want a lawn area? If so, are you going to mow the grass? Have you taken the increased water expenses into account?
8. What kinds of trees do you like? Do you want evergreen trees or deciduous trees? Would you like to have flowers and fruit? If you want a mini-orchard, what are your favorite fruits?
9. Do you have pets or children you need to take into account? If you have young kids, you may want a sandbox, tree swing, and play area. If you have teens, it may be better to have hammocks, horseshoes, and ping pong. Dogs may need an enclosed dog run, but if you have a cat, you'll probably want to nix that sandbox and instead provide a tree you can climb, too!
10. Is there wildlife in your neighborhood that you must consider-deer, raccoons, skunks, foxes, or hawks? You'll need to think about your plant list carefully.
11. Do you entertain outdoors? Do you desire a built-in outdoor kitchen or a simple barbecue area and fire pit?
12. Are you interested in adding any of the following to your landscape:
 - butterfly garden
 - cutting garden
 - hummingbird garden
 - vegetable garden
 - herb garden
 - rose garden
 - fruit orchard
 - fragrance garden
 - perennial garden
 - ponds
 - water features
 - birdbaths
 - garden ornaments
 - outdoor furniture
 - exterior lighting
 - music and sound
13. List the special needs of your family and pets (for example, basketball or sport court, doghouse, aviary, workshop playhouse, shed, croquet court, etc)
14. Will you install an irrigation system? If so, what are your requirements?
15. How much light do you have in each area? Do you have morning sun, all shade, hot afternoon sun?
16. Do you want to plant a colorful garden filled with annuals and perennials? Do you prefer planting bulbs and corms? Or do you want a variety of ground



covers, shrubs and bushes?

17. And finally, the toughest question in this economy?-what is your budget? Be realistic. It is not just the cost of the trees, flowers, and bushes, you'll need to include topsoil, soil amendmets, compost, labor, fertilizer, and water.

Once you have recorded your answers, you'll want to drive around your neighborhood. Lamorinda boasts many micro-climates, but if you choose plants that thrive in areas near your home, most likely the same plants will do well in your garden as well. If you choose exotic plants and they don't survive, chalk up the experience as an experiment. As I'm famous for quoting, "there is no failure in gardening because failure is fertilizer. Put your mistakes on the compost pile, and grow a new garden."

Here's a selection of my favorite plants that generally grow well in Lamorinda and can be planted as soon as the last frost is over and the soil has warmed. This list is by no means complete. Do visit your local nursery to see what is hardy and in stock for spring.

Achillea	Dicentra	Liriope Muscari
Anemone	Digitalis	Lupine
Artemisia	Euphorbia	Monarda
Aquilegia	Fall bulbs	Ornamental
Aster	Fern	Grasses
Astilbes	Gaillardia	Pansy
buddleia	Geraniums	Penstemon
Campanula	Helleborus	Phlox
Clematis	Heuchera	Rudbeckia
Coreopsis	Hollyhock	Salvia
Daylily	Hosta	Sedum
Delphinium	Hydrangea	Shasta Daisy
Dianthus	Lavandula	Veronica
		Viola



Photos Cynthia Brian

Read the Labels

Fertilizing begins this month. Do you know what N-P-K mean? Plants need different elements to boost their growth and blooms. N is for Nitrogen, which stimulates leaf formation and gives plants their healthy green glow. P is for Phosphorus, which encourages root formation. Sturdy roots supply beautiful flowers and fruit set. K is for Potassium, which promotes hardiness and disease resistance. The three numbers that appear on fertilizer labels indicate the percentage of Nitrogen, Phosphorous, or Potassium.

For example a 5-10-15 means that the package of fertilizer includes five percent Nitrogen, ten percent Phosphorus, and fifteen percent Potassium, also called Potash. A listing is required by law on all organic fertilizers as well as synthetic and chemical products.

Spring is the time of new birth. We get energized and excited as the weather warms. Get off the couch, get into the garden and dig deep. The season of life is beginning anew.

Cynthia's Digging Deep Gardening Guide for April

"In the spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt." Margaret Atwood
Now the fun begins. You actually get your hands dirty. Before you start your spring gardening, make sure to clean and sharpen your tools. Spring forward and cure the fever.

- PRUNE wisteria before it leafs out to promote flowering.
- REMOVE old foliage around the new growth of perennials. Keep compost a few inches away from stems to prevent disease and rotting.
- PLANT frost tender plants such as bougainvillea, hibiscus, ground covers, and citrus as the weather warms. Also choose from the list I provided to add a bit of color. Try planting tomatoes in containers.
- RESEED lawns that are sparse or put our new sod.
- CUTTINGS can be taken from geraniums, carnations, fuchsias and many succulents.
- START seeds of your favorite flowers indoors if the weather is still chilly, then transplant outside as the soil warms.
- BAIT the snails and slugs who will hungrily devour any new seedlings. Pick them off plants by hand, use copper barriers, or get them drunk with bowls of beer.
- HOSE off any aphids. Place paper-cups around transplants to discourage cutworms.
- BUY ladybugs at your garden center for natural insect hunting.
- DANDELIONS are edible and nutritious. Wash and add to a salad. If they are overtaking your lawn, spray with vinegar.
- FERTILIZE fall-planted bushes, citrus, roses, lawns, and ground covers. All annuals require a monthly shot of fertilizer. Learn what the N-P-K mean and read all labels before applying any purchased product.
- FEED your rhododendrons now and again after blooming in May.
- FLOAT camellias in a bowl. Camellias are in their full glory for just a few more weeks, so bring them indoors to enjoy.
- PREPARE your vegetable garden for planting. Add the compost from your bins and enrich the soil.
- ROSES are blooming again. Make sure to deadhead to keep the fresh buds coming.
- SUMMER annuals are now stocked in the nurseries. Get there early for the best selection.
- COMPOSTING is still important. Keep adding to your pile or bin, turning, and watering for rapid processing. Kitchen scraps are good for composting. Re-using natural materials and applying organic mulches is safer for all living organisms including you.
- CUT branches from your flowering fruit trees to use in the house as natural mood lifters. A flower a day keeps depression away!

- CHILDREN love the outdoors. Dig together and teach them about photosynthesis and pollination.



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