

December 2010 - Digging Deep

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian-Gifts of the Garden

"In search of my mother's garden, I found my own." -Alice Walker

Other than a trip to Disneyland, traveling to my mother's gardens during the holiday season is an experience to remember. Her acres of flora are spectacular any time of the year, but from early December until January 6th the grounds are turned into a dazzling winter wonderland of color, light, sound, and fragrance. Growing up on the farm in Napa Valley, we five children anticipated Christmas a full three hundred and thirty days every year. The other thirty-five days were spent in total ecstasy as we played, sang, and celebrated this festival of merriment.

Since we lived so far away from the city lights (down in the boondocks as we lovingly referred to our valley), Mom and Dad told us it was imperative that we decorated the gardens and orchards so that Santa could find his way to our vineyards. Oh, how many nights we spent scanning the star lit sky for any sign of his sleigh sailing through the galaxy! Rudolph's bright red nose would be spotted on Christmas Eve after we had distributed many gifts from the garden and kitchen to friends and family. We'd rush home from midnight Mass to fill a bucket of freshly harvested carrots as a treat for the tired reindeer and of course, leave Santa and the elves plates of homemade cookies accompanied by a bouquet of cyclamen or roses for Mrs. Claus. The secret to a happy holiday was always centered on giving from the garden.

The magic and majesty of our holiday traditions continues today as I learn the lessons from my mother's garden while designing my own. No matter what the temperature of the economy, the best things that come from the garden are gifts for other people. Whether you have a large or small plot, a cornucopia of creative concepts abound in the ground. Whether decorative, culinary, or keepsake, homemade presents are always appreciated because they truly come from the heart. Here's a list of ideas for your green holiday giving.

- If you have pine trees, gather pinecones. Fill a Santa hat and wrap with a bow.
- Fill large pinecones with peanut butter. Tie a ribbon from the stem, wrap in cellophane and make a tag, "For the birds only!" Everyone loves watching the birds enjoy their treats.
- Allow some rose hips to form on your favorite rose bushes. Cut a stem of bright red rose hips along with a spray of lavender, tie with cheerful trim, and add a recipe for a vitamin C fragrant tea.
- Amaryllis is a spectacular long lasting bloomer available in a variety of colors perfect for the season. Plant a bulb earlier in the season for a December show, or buy a flowering plant now and place it in a watering can or decorative bucket to give as a garden gift.
- Dry flowers for potpourri and make beautiful sa-

chets and aromatic fresheners.

- Gather and press flowers in unique compositions against a velvet background in a gilded frame reminiscent of the Victorian era.
- For the feline on your gift list, construct a sturdy pillow filled with catnip.
- Preserve the favor, appearance, taste, and aroma of favorite flowers and leaves by making candy from violets, rose petals, lilac florets, citrus peels, and mint. (Caution-make sure that all the flowers and leaves you use for any gastronomic treats are indeed edible. Don't guess-be certain!)
- Flavor a cup of sugar by mixing in $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of fresh petals of roses, lemon balm, lavender, verbena, geranium, or mint. Sprinkle on fruit, dust a Yule log, or sweeten a holiday punch.
- For enchanting savory treats, package carafes of herbed vinegar and olive oil using sprigs of basil, tarragon, dill, thyme, rosemary, or nasturtium. Add a couple of gloves of garlic for zing.
- Buy four-inch color spots and line a French bread basket. Top with tinsel.
- Give rooted cuttings of your favorite plants in a variety of pretty recycled jars.
- Customize your gifts by giving a mushroom farm

with a box of herbs to a chef or mints, lemons, and limes to a bartender.

- Make table place cards for the party host of pomander balls using thick-skinned fruit such as oranges, apples, lemons, grapefruit, and limes. Stud with cloves, roll in allspice, and slide the nametags between the cloves.
- Pull up volunteer trees from your yard, making sure to protect the roots. Plant in holiday themed urns, practical containers, or refurbished canisters.
- Teens can collect discarded CD's, string a glittering ribbon through the center, and present a box as décor for a shimmering outdoor tree. (Great to deter the birds and squirrels from your persimmon trees!)
- For the gardener, wrap a basket containing a high quality pruner, exotic seeds, the book, *Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul*, a pair of heavy-duty gloves, and a bottle of hand lotion.
- Buy cymbidium orchids with two or more glorious blooming stems for under \$20 throughout December. Add a peacock or pheasant feather, wrap in Chanukah, Christmas, or Kwanza cloth, and write a homemade sticker that reads, "Water weekly with warm H2O. Keep in 50-70 degrees providing moderate light. Celebrate beauty!"

...continued on next page.



Magenta cymbidium orchid with peacock and pheasant feathers makes a wonderful gift.

Photo Cynthia Brian