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Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for December

By Cynthia Brian



Cynthia's mother decorates so that Santa can find the ranch. Photo Cynthia Brian

"I look upon the pleasure we take in a garden as one of the most innocent delights in human life." - Cicero

It is hard to believe that the holidays are already here. Wasn't it just yesterday that I was taking down Christmas decorations?

What would the holidays be without the high voltage displays of thousands of twinkling lights illuminating our landscapes? We drive around neighborhoods "oohing and aahing" at the inflatable snowmen waving to us, Santa's sleigh on the rooftops tethered to his blinking reindeer, and flickering candy canes hanging from tree branches. My mom's house is lit up like Disneyland to make sure that Santa can find his way to our ranch.

My last few columns have initiated numerous emails and comments. It appears that gardeners are very interested in hugelkultur as well as growing grass that is not water thirsty.

Regarding the hugels, from the state of Washington I received this very astute email:

"I just read your gardening guide and immediately thought about how the trees where we go camping do this naturally. Frequently, trees have started by growing from a stump or downed tree trunk. Then, over time, everything mounds up at the base of the new tree. The spaces underneath provide habitat for a multitude of creatures, and the rotting logs, needles, and leaves are material for insects to do terra-forming. They combine the organic with rock that continually slides down from the mountains and into the streams and eventually becomes sand, to form rich soil."

Another thing all this debris on the ground does is to shade the soil, keeping it cooler and protected from evaporation. We use rocks in favor of bark or mulch in many places in our yard. I have thought for years about the practice in the Southwest of keeping all the undergrowth cleared out of forests to help with the wildfire problem - how it sterilizes the forest, taking away opportunities for habitat and soil protection.

We certainly had more than our share of wildfires in Washington State the last couple of years, and I will admit the forest is quite different in those regions. The trees, until you get up really far into the mountains, are very spaced out with no green undergrowth. They traditionally have very cold winters with a lot of snow that lingers, then long, very hot and dry summers.

The mounding practice is something we see nature doing all the time in the mountains near us." KC

KC hit the nail on the head! I was really thrilled to receive this correspondence because hugelkultur derived from exactly this natural forest procedure. In my own yard I have now built two hugels and am planning to continue to build them, especially on my hillsides to prevent erosion, maintain water, and allow plants to grow deeper roots.

On the subject of lawns, I have installed three different areas of Pearl's Premium grass: sun, shade, and sun-shade. It is still too early to report results to you but I do promise to keep you posted on how this miracle turf flourishes. Many of you are very interested in growing a low maintenance grass. With just one or two weeks left of optimum weather, buy new top soil and start sowing. The seed may be carried at your local garden centers or big box stores, but if not, go online to www.PearlsPremium.com. Don't forget to type in "Blue Moon" at check out to receive a 20 percent discount and free shipping.

The festival of lights is upon us as we hark the heralded angels and remember the reason for the season. Light a fire in your heart and shine brightly with love. Tidy your garden, then enjoy the merriment.

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POT an amaryllis for mid-winter blooms happening eight to 12 weeks after first watering. All you need is a small pot not much bigger than the bulb, soil and water.

ADD alliums to your planting schedule for spring lollipop blooms. Voles, rabbits, deer and squirrels will not eat these onion family bulbs.

COVER azaleas and tender shrubs with burlap, sheets or blankets (any fabric will do) to prevent damage from drastic drops in temperature.

HARVEST prickly pear when the skins are red. Wear gloves and use tongs to peel before adding to salads.

CUT branches from redwoods, cedars, pines and other evergreens to use indoors for your yuletide dcor.

HANG a spray of magnolia leaves tied in a colorful ribbon on your mailbox. Magnolias with the coned seedpods stimulate a festive welcome.

GATHER pinecones. Sprinkle with a cinnamon oil for a lovely holiday fragrance.

CHANGE out your current houseplants with colorful seasonal plants including cyclamen, paperwhites and poinsettia. Beautiful long blooming cymbidium orchids are currently available in stores. Orchids contribute an elegance and beauty to every room.

RAKE the fallen leaves to add to your compost pile.

PRUNE roses for the final burst of December blooms before the January pruning begins.

BE eco-friendly and wrap gifts in used newspaper with twine. You'll save money while saving the earth. And while you are at it, repurpose Christmas cards into gift tags!

PLANT cover crops to enrich the soil over winter. Good choices include fava beans, alfalfa, clover and mustard.

PURCHASE a living tree for your Hanukkah bush or Christmas tree.

ALLOW winter's coat of bright berries, rosehips, moss and boughs to be the inspiration for your decorating.

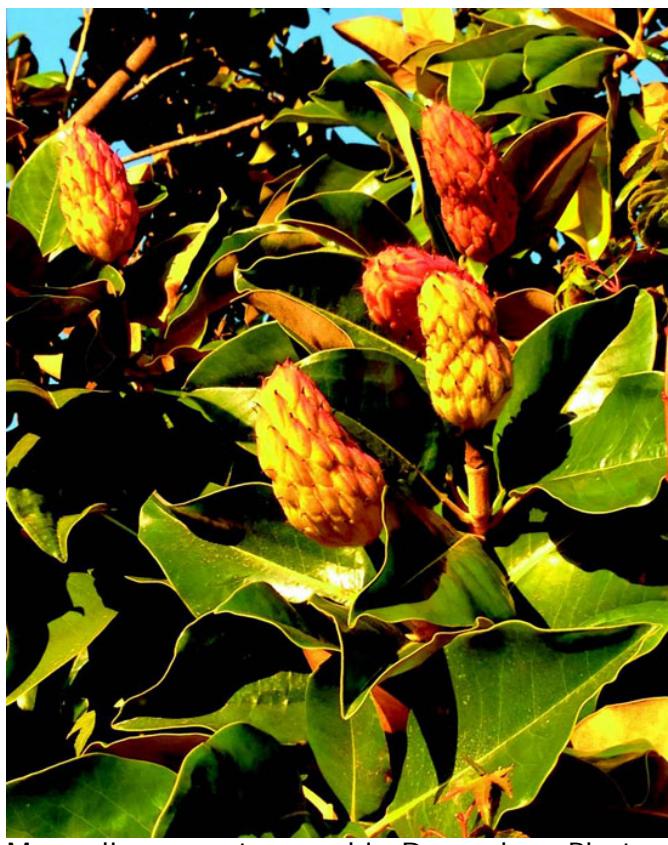
CARE for the birds by keeping feeders clean and filled. Make sure to provide a water source and shelter.

HOLIDAY FAVOR: Help local charity Be the Star You Are!(r) without spending a penny. If you purchased a TV or computer screen between 1999 and 2006, you are due a refund and can donate it directly to Be the Star You Are. You will receive a tax receipt once the donations have been dispersed. Please do this today. It costs you nothing. Thanks from Be the Star You Are.

<http://www.donatedirect.net/be-the-star-you-are-crt/> Read more: <http://www.btsya.com/>

As we prepare for the holidays, let's offer thoughts and actions of faith, hope, and love with the expectation that peace can prevail on our beautiful planet. Take pleasure in nature. Our gardens are a precious refuge. Happy Holidays!

Happy Gardening, Happy Growing!



Magnolia cones turn red in December. Photos Cynthia Brian



A combination of ferns and poinsettias brighten a porch.



Moss is pretty growing on a winter wall.



Yew berries are excellent for holiday decorating.

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