

Published July 13th, 2016

Digging Deep

By Cynthia Brian



Who can resist a summery arrangement of sunflowers and hydrangeas? Photos Cynthia Brian

When it's sweltering outside, I want to be in the garden. I find it challenging to sit in my office writing articles or producing radio shows when nature beckons me to be nurturing the earth.

In summer I spend several hours of every single day digging in the dirt whether it's early in the morning or after dusk because my chores are never finished. Like the gardening wardrobes of my siblings, mine usually consists of my bathing suit and shorts allowing me a quick cool down with a spray from the garden hose. As my daughter was working in her garden in her bikini she telephoned to declare that she was carrying on our family tradition. "I realize I come from a long line of bikini gardeners," she giggled. I thought of titling my next gardening book, "The Bikini Gardener," but then perhaps readers would expect to see beautiful bikini clad bodies instead of gorgeous gardens. I promise not to be photographed.

Baby, it's hot outside and we gardeners have work to do. We have to be water conscious, yet we see the bare spots in our landscape and yearn to make our personal paradise a more beautiful place. What are our options?

Planting annuals and perennials offer the answers to filling in those areas that just never seem to seed well. Between the turkeys, deer and raccoons, our landscapes have many hurdles to overcome and I'm determined to continue to find ways to succeed.

Here are a few of my favorite recommendations for adding sparkle, individuality and excitement without the extra water and work this season.

Sun loving vinca (*Catharanthus roseus*) crave six hours of sunlight a day and do well in extreme heat. Colors are violet, peach, white and bright pink. Lately I've seen these annuals on sale at garden centers for as little as \$4.50 a gallon or three for \$12, offering a kaleidoscope of shades at bargain prices.

Lantana once established needs minimal water or maintenance. Butterflies, hummingbirds and bees are attracted to the highly scented flowers, although some humans find the plant stinky. The deer are repelled by lantana. Some cultivars have variegated leaves, and all are evergreen, blooming all year long. Trailing lantana is terrific on hillsides and spilling out of containers. Buy the shrub variety when you want width and height that grows to three to 10 feet. Multi-colors include orange, yellow, purple, pink and white.

Looking for an easy-care container garden? Consider the Deckorations Collection from JBerry Nursery. Combinations of the highest quality plants paired with stylish, functional containers make for turnkey patio prettiness. I have the lantana, azaleas and hibiscus. www.jberrynursery.com

Have you ever grown okra? Experiment with seeds from Botanical Interests (www.BotanicalInterests.com) These spineless productive plants boast flowers that resemble hollyhocks with pods that are full bodied and delectable, especially in a gumbo.

None of the marauding animals seem to be interested in nasturtiums, making them an excellent choice when you are looking for a creeping specimen with edible leaves and flowers. Seeds from Rene's Garden (www.RenesGarden.com) are strong and sturdy. I use the big lily pad-looking leaves as wraps instead of bread and the flowers embellish my salads and plates. In the heat of summer, nasturtiums die back. Collect the seeds to plant in other areas or give away to friends. Seeds self-sow where they drop, offering you another delicious and pretty crop.

Sunflowers make me happy. Their big bright cheery faces stand tall at the back of a garden reminding us that summer is in full swing. When dry, eat the seeds or share them with the birds. Combine hydrangeas with sunflowers for a spectacular cut-flower arrangement.

If you want to plant a native tree that will thrive in our area with no care and even less water while flowering for a couple of months with fronds of creamy crape myrtle like flowers, try a California buckeye (*Aesculus californic*). Buckeyes are endemic to California hillsides, creeks and canyons. Add one or three to spice up your yard.

Roses are a must for every garden. I am particularly fond of David Austin Roses and have planted an additional dozen this past spring. Although bare-root arrives in January or February, a rooted rose in a gallon container will thrive when planted correctly in summer. Water deeply until established and dead head the blooms regularly for a display of beauty through winter. When you buy a quality rose, it requires little care while bolstering the drama of your garden all year. www.DavidAustinRoses.com

A natural and versatile herb, yarrow (*Achillea*) is actually a long-stemmed member of the sunflower family. Like sunflowers, it is deer resistant. Achilles, the Greek god unfortunately failed to paint his heel with a tincture of yarrow to make his body invulnerable to arrows. We know the rest of the story. Feathery, fern-like silver-gray leaves mark this fast growing native with flat clusters of florets in yellow, white, apricot, red or pink depending on the variety.

Sea Holly Thistle (*Ernginium*) is a prickly textured plant with leaves like an artichoke. A sun lover, as much as the bees enjoy it, the deer don't. Use it in striking arrangements.

A jewel of a flower, Oriental wind poppies (*Papaver orientale*) take two years to bloom and hate transplanting, but once you sow them, you'll enjoy them forever as they bloom from spring through summer.

Another great Asian contribution includes the Asiatic lily. I prefer the deep pink variety, *Lilium Speciosum*. Plant as bulbs for a happy surprise as they burst into bloom year after year.

I'm grateful for the summer and for the heat, so I'm signing off to go play in my backyard in my bikini. Stay cool and enjoy your July family festivities.

Happy gardening and happy growing.



Asiatic lilies grow from bulbs and return year after year.



Prickly Sea holly thistles look ominous, yet are great cut flowers. Photos Cynthia Brian



Buckeye Trees are native and endemic to California



White roses are spectacular on a trellis.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA