

Published August 24th, 2016

## Digging Deep

By Cynthia Brian



A lavender trumpet vine covers the archway leading to the front porch. Photos Cynthia Brian

"Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier." - Mother Teresa

Every artist has her or his muse, a person who inspires, motivates, and encourages creativity. Leonardo had Lisa, Quentin has Uma, Mother Teresa had God, and I credit my mother, Alice, with being my gardening artiste. From the time that I could toddle, I was following her around our expansive gardens planted for both the edibles and the pretties.

When she and my dad first moved to their house built at the turn of the 20th century on the 365-acre ranch in the middle of nowhere, it was surrounded by brambles, blackberry bushes and poison oak. Little by little she painstakingly transformed the prickly jungle into a playful park planted with myriad beautiful flowers, herbs, trees, grasses, fruits and vegetables.

I can still smell the sweet fragrance of the spring soil as we tilled the plots designated as the vegetable garden. Mom would plant starts of tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, zucchini, bush beans, string beans, eggplant and whatever other vegetable caught her fancy for the year. The five kids would be given seeds of radishes, beets, corn, carrots, turnips, squash and melons to plant as we wished. Onions, leeks, garlic and Swiss Chard seemed to be in abundance year-round, as did a big patch of culinary herbs-basil, mustard, chives, dill, fennel, parsley, oregano, marjoram, mints, rosemary, sage, tarragon and thyme. We didn't have automatic irrigation. All of us were responsible for daily watering, pulling hoses for long distances as Mom always did. She showed us how to plant rows, squares, circles, how to soak each plant plentifully, what to weed and what not to touch.

We couldn't wait until summer when the first tomato ripened. With a handful of basil, we'd bite into the juicy goodness right there in the garden. One August she grew a five-pound tomato, won a big prize, was recorded in the newspapers, and carried it around to multiple events exhibiting its enormity to anyone interested until it rotted. Long before the trend of farm-to-table, my Mom cooked what was freshest and harvested that day. We only ate what was in season or, in the winter months, what we canned during the summer. To this day, I won't eat tomatoes, grapes or oranges out of season. Why bother? They taste like chalk. Only vine-ripened fruit and vegetables have the flavor that transport me to the joys of childhood on the farm. And what blissful days they were!

But it wasn't only the vegetable and herb gardening techniques that she was imparting. Mom also instilled in us a wistful, playful attitude in the art of gardening. "Gardens are an extension of your personality," she would tell us. And her gardens were wild, fun, surprising, eclectic and inviting. Tucked into ravines would be antique stoves with antiquated rusting teapots overflowing with succulents.

When we outgrew our swing set, it was turned into a hanging pot canopy accessed by a wooden bridge over a dry creek flanked by palm trees. Gazing balls, clay piglets and hummingbird feeders dotted the landscape. Her favorite garden ornaments, a vintage bargain purchase bought for her by

my brother decades ago, have always been Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. She decorates the garden for all of the holidays with Christmas being the grand finale - an extravaganza of sound and light rivaling Disneyland.

As an adult, our main conversations revolve around plants. We stroll together through our mutual playgrounds admiring, trading and consulting. I am grateful for the horticultural acumen that she liberally passed along to us. Although there wasn't a kindergarten where I grew up, I learned everything I needed to know about life in my Mother's Garden.

What I learned from my Mother Muse:

- Be an original: You can reference Pinterest, but when it comes to your own personal style, do what you love. Surprise yourself.
- Don't follow the rules: Because there are no rules in the garden except those you create yourself.
- Love the birds: My mom has hung bird feeders and birdhouses in every cranny for her feathered friends. She even has a Bird Tree. Birds eat the insects that prey on her flowers plus their melodic songs are music to her ears and their playful antics make bird watching an amusing pastime.
- Encourage eccentricity: If you don't feel happy in your backyard, no one else will either. Be playful. Add unexpected treasures that may be another person's trash. Capture the charm.
- Share the bounty: One of my mom's most sacred rituals was sharing the harvest of everything we grew with everyone she knew - her doctor, dentist, priest, hairdresser, bank teller, repairman, even other famers. Be a cheerful giver.
- Grow everything: It can be boring to stick to just a few specimens. Give a whirl to experimenting with the exotic as well as the mundane. Whether it's a new breed of ever-blooming azalea, a delicate peach begonia, or a hardy lavender trumpet vine, brave the unknown.
- Color Your World: Although you may start out with a strict color palette, be the artist you are. Volunteers revert to their original color according to Mother Nature's whims. Enjoy the rainbow.
- Provide places to relax: Gardeners work hard. Make sure to include comfortable sitting and lounging areas, and a shady patio for you and your guests.
- Believe in magic: A garden is a lesson in miracles and magic. Embrace the whimsy and the mysterious. Have fun.
- Pull hoses: You may have a drip or other irrigation system, but you'll need the humble hose to get to every corner.
- Make people happy: With her outgoing, enthusiastic personality always ready for the next dance, my mother lights up a room, including the outdoor variety. When your table features fresh fruits and vegetables that you have personally grown, you can be certain that you are providing the highest nourishment for your family and friends, helping everyone be happier and healthier.
- Leave a living legacy: A garden is to grow. Every garden is different reflecting the individuality of the gardener. Family is everything. Bloom with love.

Everyone who has ever experienced the gardening hospitality of my mother, Alice, has left feeling better and happier. Let the wisdom of my generous garden guide muse inspire you to be the best gardener possible. Thanks Mom!

Who is your garden muse? Email me at [Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com](mailto:Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com).

Happy Gardening. Happy Growing.

Mark your Calendars:

VISIT the National Heirloom Expo, Sept. 6 through Sept. 8 in Santa Rosa for the world's pure food fair. [www.theheirloomexpo.com](http://www.theheirloomexpo.com).

SHOP and save at the 10/10 sale on Sept. 17 at Vineyard Vines, 1301 N. Main St., Walnut Creek. Customers receive 10 percent off their purchases all day with 10 percent of the proceeds benefiting Be the Star You Are! A reception will be held from 5-8 p.m. with refreshments and goody bags. [www.btsya.com/events\\_calendar.html](http://www.btsya.com/events_calendar.html).

ATTEND the Pear & Wine Festival at Moraga Commons from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 24. Pick up complimentary potpourri and a new children's book from the Be the Star You Are! booth sponsored by MB Jesse Painting, Starstyle Productions, LLC, Lamorinda Weekly, Children's Success Unlimited, and Michael VerBrugge Construction.

Click on events at [www.BetheStarYouAre.org](http://www.BetheStarYouAre.org).



Tomatoes ripening on the vine.



Alice's prized garden ornaments were the vintage characters of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.



Azaleas line a brick walkway. Photos Cynthia Brian



A favorite summer staple is zucchini.



Under the fig tree is a cool spot to gather and rest on the patio.



Luscious heirloom tomatoes fresh from the vines.



Cynthia Brian and her Mother Muse in the vineyards (c)2016 Cynthia Brian The Goddess Gardener Starstyle(r) Productions, llc Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com www. GoddessGardener.com 925-377-STAR Tune into Cynthia's Radio show at www. StarStyleRadio.net I am available as a speaker, designer, and consultant.

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA