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Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



The azaleas and bergenia highlight the blow-up Santa and snowman. Photos Cynthia Brian

It was a holiday tradition for our family of seven to pile into our old station wagon to head to the hills of San Francisco to experience the beauty of the decorated homes in Pacific Heights. We called our favorite street Teddy Bear Lane, since we were so young we didn't know its real name. (And I still don't know where it was!) It was spectacular with a full block of beautiful Victorians lit up with teddy bears flanked by flickering candles in every window. Another street boasted sparkling reindeer, glistening snowmen, serene nativity scenes, and some even showcased Santa and his sleigh on the steep rooftops. Gardens twinkled with illumination making the night merry and bright.

After all the "oohing and aahing," we'd head to Fisherman's Wharf to pick up fresh crabs for our Christmas Eve meal, then wander down to Ghiradelli for a cup of hot cocoa. The coins we had been saving all year to help children enjoy a festive celebration were deposited into the bucket of the man ringing the bell from the Salvation Army. We kids dreamt of sugarplums, teddy bears, star-studded skies, and busy elves on the two-hour drive back to the ranch as we anxiously anticipated the excitement of the season. It was a deeply satisfying annual excursion, the kind that etches itself into one's memory forever.

Since we lived in the middle of nowhere, down a mile-long lane with no street lamps to light the night, our fear was that Santa wouldn't be able to find our

farmhouse, much less our chimney. To ease our worries, our parents lit two acres of our fields, orchards, and gardens, creating a virtual runway as a navigational guide to steer Rudolph to the right place. We pulled carrots from the vegetable garden to nourish the tired reindeer. Naturally we baked gingerbread cookies as a treat for Jolly St. Nick accompanied by a big glass of milk and a note of gratitude for his generosity. We hoped his list had checked us off as "nice" instead of "naughty."

This December as I drive around local neighborhoods, I am reliving the joyfulness of my youth without having to drive to Teddy Bear Lane in San Francisco. Residents who celebrate Christmas adorn their houses, trees, shrubs and gardens with garlands, wreaths, ornaments and twinkling lights of every color. The décor is rich, festive and fun. It takes time and patience to unravel a string of lights, especially if they are from a previous year, but the rewards are worth the trouble.

Aside from raking leaves, mulching, planting cover crops, and transplanting cuttings, there isn't too much work to do in a December garden. Across the country, most landscapes are setting in for their winter slumber. With less chores to accomplish, I champion a different decorating challenge every day with the final goal of having the crape myrtle trees on my driveway shimmer under the glinting moonlight. I'll be snipping fresh redwood, cypress and pine boughs for their fresh forest scent to add to doors and windows adorned with holly and pistache berries. Poinsettias are already on the porch and vases of blooming narcissi perfume the bathrooms. Amaryllis is budding in anticipation of a Dec. 25 appearance.

This is an enchanted time of year. Take time to savor the seconds with family and friends as you watch the lights of the nights. Offer your heart. Bequeath your soul. Gift suggestions that cost you nothing include forgiving someone who has injured you, being a role model to young people, providing kindness to all, while respecting and loving yourself.

As Norman Vincent Peale wrote, "Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful." May the magic of this blessed time shine a light on you and your loved ones. Merry Christmas from my home to yours. Cynthia Brian's mid-month garden guide

CLEAN the dead leaves from bearded iris to prevent rot and insect hideouts.

CUT boughs of evergreens to mold into wreaths and garlands.

PLANT a cover crop to increase nitrogen and protect against winter erosion. Fava beans, clover, vetch and mustard are excellent choices. To find seeds, visit www.rareseeds.com or www.sowtrueseed.com.

GIVE the gift of my new book, "Growing with the Goddess Gardener," 12 months of inspiration and gardening tips to sustain your inner gardener with a full year of kindness and happiness in nature. Buy directly from www.cynthiabrian.com/online-store and 25 percent is a donation to Be the Star You Are!(r) charity, plus you'll receive extra goodies and an autographed copy.

FEED the birds. Baby, it's cold outside and our birds need food and shelter. Make sure to clean your birdhouses and feeders regularly.

WATCH for rats and mice. As the cold weather begins, vermin seek a warm bed and easy-to-find food.

CHECK plants that you've brought inside for the winter for any insect infestation.

WATER your Christmas trees. If you purchased a cut tree, make sure it has plenty of water throughout

the month as indoor heat will quickly dry out any conifer.

COVER frost tender plants with burlap, sheets, newspaper or straw. Be on the alert for swift temperature swings.

REMOVE the longer canes from wisteria.

PRUNE crape myrtles and fruit trees once all the leaves have dropped.

RAKE leaves as they fall and add to the compost pile. Allow a half inch to an inch of leaves to remain on the soil. Compost the rest.

PERUSE garden catalogues and read books about landscaping as you curl up with with cup of hot chocolate or licorice cinnamon tea.

PREVENT snails and slugs from devouring your plants by adding copper strips or bowls of stale beer to the perimeter of your garden.

PICK UP guavas that fall and use for jams or juices.

ADD a bowl of freshly picked Meyer lemons to your countertop as a useful culinary display.

FILL your Christmas tree or Hannukah bush with every family ornament that you've been saving for years! Nostalgia reigns supreme.

BUY a small living cypress tree to use as an inexpensive Christmas tree in lieu of a cut fir. Some stores have been selling three- to four-foot specimens for less than \$8.

VISIT an Asian market to buy the delicious exotic Dragon fruit.

SELECT colorful and easy-to-grow crotons or ginger plants to add a fantasy island fling to your festivities.

WATCH for snow plants to sprout in the Sierras.

MAKE a tax-deductible donation to help with hurricanes and California fires disaster relief at www.BetheStarYouAre.org. Every dollar counts. Be the Star You Are!(r) cares.

It is the season of giving and sharing. Have yourselves a very Merry Christmas.

Happy Gardening and Happy Growing!
Cynthia Brian



Holly is a traditional symbol of the holidays.



The red, regal, and exotic dragon fruit will spark a holiday conversation.



Guavas as falling from the trees. Make cookies, jams and guava duff.



Be on the alert for the first signs of the snow plant.



Crotons are easy to grow and make lovely houseplants.



Tropical ginger plants may need draping with burlap as they are frost tender.



Meyer lemons will ripen on the counter.



A traveler's tree with a row of white poinsettia.



Cynthia Brian and her Be the Star You Are!® volunteers wishes you a Holly Jolly Christmas.

Cynthia Brian, The Goddess Gardener, raised in the vineyards of Napa County, is a New York Times best selling author, actor, radio personality, speaker, media and writing coach as well as the Founder and Executive Director of Be the Star You Are!® 501 c3.

Tune into Cynthia's Radio show and order her books at www.StarStyleRadio.com.

My new book, Growing with the Goddess Gardener, is available at www.cynthiabrian.com/online-store.

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