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## Digging Deep with Goddess Gardener, Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



Sliced apples on the dehydrator trays.

"And all at once, summer collapsed into fall." - Oscar Wilde

In the fall of my freshman year at UCLA, I began working at one of the very first health food stores ever created in California. It was called Nature's Health Cove and all the offerings were organic: pesticide, insecticide, and colorant-free. The fruits and vegetables were pathetic looking. Worms bored into apples, the Swiss chard had holes from munching snails, greens boasted fringed tips, a gift from hungry marauding rabbits, tomatoes were cracked, zucchini was malformed. Yet the produce tasted delicious and even though the prices were at least double of anything one could purchase at a grocery store, the crops sold rapidly. One of my tasks was to cull through any severely damaged items, putting them in a bucket for a compost pickup by an urban farmer.

Having worked in the fruit drying yards and big barn dehydrators growing up on our farm, it dawned on me that usually, half or more of any fruit or vegetable is salvageable. I suggested to the owner that perhaps we could cut out the decaying parts and create healthy drinks and dried snacks with the ripe remainders. The initiative became an instant success with both students and the general public clamoring for a revolving menu of inexpensive tasty treats.

As summer collapses into fall, my trees and vines are heavy with fruit. As much as I eat and give away, there is still more for the picking. I detest waste and besides canning and freezing the extras, I wanted to create some of my youth.

While cleaning out one of our barns this summer, I came upon a vintage portable dehydrator that my grandfather used eons ago to dry his autumn bounty of pears, apples, figs and grapes. I cleaned the appliance and set to work slicing and dicing.

The results were phenomenal.

If you've bought any dried fruit lately, you know how expensive it is. But if you are like me and enjoy DIY projects, I have a simple recipe for you to create your own personal organic fruit leathers. You can use trays and dry your produce in the sun the way it has been done for centuries, but it takes longer and critters may creep in to steal your sweets. My suggestion is to purchase a small dehydrator with four or five drawers. My dehydrator has four drawers and only a single heat setting. My thermometer says it's dehydrating at 125 degrees, which is perfect. Every three hours I move the drawers from the bottom to the top. From start to finish, it takes 24 hours. If you buy a dehydrator with adjustable temperature settings, you'll be able to dehydrate more rapidly.

Here's what to do:

1. Wash and pat dry your desired fruit and vegetables.
2. You can peel if you wish, but I don't. Cut away any bruised or damaged parts. Cut into slices about 1/4 to 1/2 inch thick.
3. Some vegetables including eggplant, cauliflower, broccoli, carrots, zucchini, potatoes and radishes need to be blanched for a few minutes.
4. Cut the slices in a bowl and toss with lemon juice or apple vinegar to reduce browning. Although this step is optional, it helps in preservation.
5. Spray the trays with a light spritz of canola or olive oil to prevent sticking.
6. Place slices of the same fruit or vegetable on dehydrator racks in a single layer without overlapping. Use different trays for different varieties.
7. Check on the process until done. Let the racks cool before removing the fruit.
8. You can enjoy your items immediately, but if you want to store your stash, pack the dried fruit in glass jars or sealable plastic bags. Shake jars or bags once a day to make sure there is no condensation. If there is any moisture, return the product to the dehydrator for a bit more drying.
9. Store in a pantry or a room temperature darkened area.
10. Voila! Your very own dried fruit and leathers.

You can also put the dried fruit in bags and the freezer. I've experimented with over-ripe bananas, apples, pears, Asian pears, and I even made raisins with chardonnay grapes, seeds and all. Crunchy! Everything turns out delicious and I know these dried trials are nutritious because except for the bananas, they originate in my organic orchard. My next testing will be to make sweet potato chips from the sweet potatoes I'm growing. I plan to go exotic by drying mangoes, strawberries, pineapple and papayas.

Recently we witnessed a rise of what I call the "ugly fruit." Stores, farmers' markets, and online sites are popularizing the value of imperfect produce. This is a giant step forward in eliminating waste and re-educating our families to value all products provided by nature. Farmers using organic methods know that crops are not always pretty, but the nutritional value and health benefits outweigh perfection of form.

As summer slowly fades into fall, I wish you abundance and a garden of eating.

Cynthia Brian's Mid-Month Gardening Guide

PRUNE "widow makers" - dead branches on trees. You can identify the dead branches before the leaves fall from the rest of the tree.

CHECK the crape myrtles in bloom. If you are considering planting a tree or two later in autumn, this is the perfect time to decide what color will be an advantage to your landscape. Crape myrtles are excellent specimens for year-round attractiveness. The leaves will turn red and golden in late autumn, the bark is bare and beautiful in winter, the leaves are shiny green in spring, and the tree blooms midsummer to late fall.

REFRIGERATE crocus, tulips, and hyacinths for six weeks before planting.

ADD aged chicken manure to your soil if you are noticing that it is less fertile.

MARK your calendar for a visit to the Be the Star You Are!r nonprofit booth at the Moraga Pear and Wine Festival on Saturday, Sept. 28. Thanks to our sponsor, The Lamorinda Weekly. Details at <https://www.BetheStarYouAre.org/events>.

DEADHEAD tuberous begonias to keep them blooming until frost. The flowers are edible with a tangy, citrusy flavor.

ENJOY the final days of freshly picked tomatoes tossed with basil or cilantro.

HARVEST tangerines, Asian pears, and grapes as they ripen.

PHOTOGRAPH your deciduous trees as the changing colors emerge. The contrast of colors will amaze you as you reflect on the timeline.

DEHYDRATE extra fruit and vegetables for tasty snacks. Kids especially love these dried sweets.

CUT and compost the damaged parts from "ugly" produce and cook with the rest.

WASTE NOT! Be a steward of our planet with simple up-cycling.

WELCOME the cool and crisp days of autumn. Fall forward!

Happy Gardening. Happy Growing.



Asian Pears are bountiful. Photos Cynthia Brian



A tree filled with tangerines kissed by honeybees.



Tomatoes tossed with cilantro for an end of summer salad.



A bowl of bruised, cracked, malformed but tasty "ugly fruit".



The dried apples cool down after dehydration.



Cynthia Brian by the pink bower vine in bloom.

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!r 501 c3.

Tune into Cynthia's Radio show and order her books at [www.StarStyleRadio.com](http://www.StarStyleRadio.com).

Buy a copy of her new books, Growing with the Goddess Gardener and Be the Star You

Are! Millennials to Boomers at [www.cynthiabrian.com/online-store](http://www.cynthiabrian.com/online-store).

Hire Cynthia for projects, consults, and lectures.

[Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com](mailto:Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com)

[www.GoddessGardener.com](http://www.GoddessGardener.com)

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

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