

Published March 27th, 2013

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian Weed, Seed, Feed!

By Cynthia Brian



Delicate butter lettuce is ready for the table. Photo Cynthia Brian

"Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant." - Robert Louis Stevenson

When is the right time to plant seeds? This is a question I have often been asked as I travel throughout the country speaking on gardening issues. Over the years I have embraced the age old farmer's timing technique for planting seeds in any climate, anywhere: if you can sit on the ground with your bare bottom and not feel too cold or wet, it's warm enough to sow!

This year the ground was especially warm earlier than usual and already I have tomatoes, peppers, and squash sprouting. Winter seemed to skip by Lamorinda as we went from autumn to spring. Weeds are not as ubiquitous as they have been in the past, yet before we sow our spring seeds, it is imperative to carefully edit and amend our gardens. If you planted cover crops such as vetch, clover, or fava beans, turn them over to add the much desired nitrogen and nutrients to the soil. Other weeds need to be manually pulled and either added to compost piles or put in the green bin. Once we have made sure our soil is rich and ready, it's prime time to buy the seed packets or six packs and start

digging.

Arugula was my top pick for growing greens this season. I have planted runway serrated, rustic organic, true Italian organic, and, of course, my very favorite...wasabi. A jewel-toned blend of beets as well as purple and rattlesnake pole beans are already in the ground. A healthy crop of radiant radishes garnish our plates and butter lettuce is already curly and luscious. To add a bit of pretty to the scene, I have sowed nigella mulberry rose, larkspur Parisian pink, Echinacea purpurea starlight, and rainbow poppies. They are not yet large enough to photograph but I anticipate a compliment of colors.

Naturally, it's also important to plant pollen plants to attract the pollinators and help them thrive, which in turn helps our gardens grow. Did you know that bee pollinators provide one of every three bites we take? Honeybees have been disappearing in record numbers and butterflies have also suffered significant population declines. It is essential to eliminate pesticides and insecticides while planting flowers of varied shapes to bring the bees and butterflies.

Here are pollinator plants that can easily be grown from seed. Plant them as succession plants for three seasons of enjoyment that will also support a range of bee and butterfly species.

For Early Blooms:

Baby Blue Eyes
California Poppy
Chives
Clover
Larkspur
Lupine
Osteospermum
Pea
Poppy
Viola

For Mid-Season Beauty:

Bachelor's Button
Basil
Black-eye Susan
Borage
Calendula
Cilantro
Cosmos
Foxglove
Lavender
Squash

Thyme

For Late-Season Color:

Agastache
Amaranth
Cleome
Dahlia
Marigold
Salvia
Sunflower
Zinnia

Once you have sowed your special selections, you'll want to add a bit of organic fertilizer to feed the seed. A brew of homemade compost tea is recommended although you can purchase organic plant food at your local garden center. A regular fertilizing program is needed to keep plants growing well and attractive all season. The choice of fertilizer analysis will depend on the kinds of plants you are growing.

High nitrogen sources is perfect for plants grown for their foliage while flowering and vegetable crops prefer lower nitrogen and higher phosphorous types.

With your spring garden planted, you may now begin dreaming of the delicious crops to be harvested in the future. Water, tend, and wait!

Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for April

"Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you." Frank Lloyd Wright

Greener environments cut the time it takes to recover from surgery, improve the way the immune system works, and help diabetics achieve healthier blood glucose levels. Just like eating greens provides essential nutrients to the body, so does just seeing and being around green according to researchers. While we are happily planting our spring gardens, it is essential to savor the surprises that are already smiling on us. Sweet, fragrant stock is often overlooked, yet it is a stunner with its heady scent of clove in a variety of hues. Tulips and hyacinths top the charts as they reach for the Easter spotlight while daffodils and freesias maintain their sunshine through the end of May. Strawberry plants blossom as a harbinger of the sweet red treats to come. Give your garden a lift! It's easy to introduce exquisite beauty, luscious colors, rich perfume, and nutritious food simply by planting what you love to eat and see in your spring landscape.

- AMEND soil with compost, manure, and organic matter before preparing garden beds.
- MAKE marmalade with a variety of citrus. It's so easy using both the rind and the juice. Mix tangerine, tangelo, Meyer lemon, and orange. For a healthier jam, use less sugar and check online for recipes.
- ELIMINATE snails and slugs now by plucking from plants or drowning in beer before April showers.
- MIX perennials and annuals to extend the blooming season. Many specimens marked "annuals" are really perennials in Lamorinda including snapdragon, lobelia, primroses, and fibrous begonias. Pansies sometimes return annually.
- DISCARD fallen blooms from camellias and rhododendrons. Do not compost or leave them on the ground.
- RECHARGE spent daffodils by allowing the leaves to yellow and wither. The bulb is nourished for next season by leaving the leaves attached to the bulb. Inter-plant colorful annuals as a cover.
- DIG holes for summer blooming bulbs including tuberous begonias, gladiolus, lilies, and dahlias.
- WEED, weed, weed before you seed and feed. While the soil is still moist, roots can be plugged more easily. Don't let the seed heads scatter or next year you'll have double or triple the problem.
- WATER weekly the bare root roses, vines, and fruit trees planted earlier in the year. Stone fruit trees will bear fruit in two to three years as long as the roots are kept moist and there is plenty of sunshine.
- FERTILIZE all blooming and fruiting bushes and trees with an all-purpose organic mixer.
- BE AWARE of late season frosts that can damage tender plants. Keep blankets or sheets ready to cover your pots when warnings of cold nights are announced.
- BOOST your levels of vitamin A and C by planting orange-colored vegetables and fruits including cantaloupe, sweet potatoes, carrots, peaches, orange bell peppers, citrus, and persimmons. Oranges and tangerines are ripe and ready now.
- ENCOURAGE pollinators to your yard with swathes of salvia, sunflowers, black eyed Susan, Echinacea, borage, dill, and thyme.
- MOVE your containers to sun or shade areas to maintain the desired conditions for peak performance.
- BUY organic, free range eggs in a plethora of colors laid by chickens that eat natural greens, worms, and insects.
- SPEND time in nature and enjoy the health benefits.
- PLAN a butterfly habitat with sedum, purple coneflower, iris, prairie grasses, bee balm, nicotiana, butterfly bush, and parsley. The flowers are nectar to the adults and the leaves nourish the larvae. Don't forget to offer a restful vista of stones and a cool drink with a fountain, bird bath, or pond for the flying visitors.
- CREATE a fire safe barrier around your home by removing debris, dead branches, fire

wood, or other flammable substances before summer. It appears we may have a hot, dry season ahead with high fire danger.

- TURN on automatic lawn irrigation for a few minutes every two weeks to make sure that grass has not grown over sprinkler heads. Grass grows quickly and thickly in spring and can easily cover sprinklers making it more difficult for you to water when necessary.
- ENJOY Easter and Passover with a picnic in the back yard with family and friends.

May the Easter bunny hop through your garden and the forest fairies sprinkle dandy dust on all your seedlings. In plain English...Joyful springtime and get growing!

Happy gardening to you!

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Cynthia is available as a speaker and consultant.



Tangerine-colored osteospermum is a pollinator plant.



It's time to till the vetch cover crop into your soil to add nutrients.



The flowers of the strawberry plant herald juicy fruits to come. Photos Cynthia Brian

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