

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

Monet's Masterpiece Makeover

"My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece." Claude Monet, 1840-1926, Impressionist painter and life-long gardener



In my youth, when I still considered myself a farmer as opposed to a gardener, I viewed the magnificent oil, "The Artist's Garden in Giverny" painted in 1900 by Claude Monet, now hanging in the Musee d'Orsay in Paris. It was love at first sight, partly because the swathes of purple bearded iris reminded me of my own fields of scented dreams on our farm, and also, because as an apprentice artist, I ached to try my hand at dabbling in dots of light and color.

At the time I was a student living in Holland. April in Lisse, the Netherlands, is breathtaking at the Keukenhof as a sea of tulips in every color and shape announce the first breath of spring. Wrapped in winter wear, braving the frigid air, I attempted to capture the splendor on canvas. But it wasn't until I arrived in Normandy that the artist in me was reborn as a gardener.

Monet's garden mesmerized me. There were chickens and rabbits and a lush harmonized estate of thousands of plantings lovingly sowed. I strolled in wonder through a living painting, stopping to inhale the fragrance, and to photograph the brilliance. I vowed that when I designed my first garden, it would be in tribute to the visions of Giverny and Keukenhof sensibilities.

The acres of poison oak, blackberry bushes, and wild grasses were daunting when I bought land in Lamorinda. My quest for an impressionistic garden was almost thwarted by the unproductive clay soil and the myriad of thistles, weeds, and brush that needed to be cleared before I could begin propagating. While reading a biography of

Monet, I noted that he had hauled countless railway wagon-loads of topsoil to his Giverny garden. I followed suit with truck-loads of loam and compost.

With copious amounts of aid from my Dutch and French inspirations, my horticultural passion was two years in the making before my painter's palette beds yielded armloads of flowers in tones of amethyst, rose, sapphire, indigo, vanilla, and pale yellows. How delighted I was to witness my hillsides carpeted in colors carefully chosen for beauty, balance, and bounty!

Then Mother Nature intervened with a reminder that our climate zones differ by cloaking Lamorinda in a fortnight of below freezing weather. By the time the earth thawed, my carefully designed dream had drowned, died, and decomposed. The Dutch bulbs survived the cold becoming the foundation of my masterpiece makeover. Heartbroken yet determined, I underpinned the landscape with a more wild, tousled scene, allowing a rainbow of colors, textures, and plant specimens to frame the undulating fields.

Today my garden boasts mementos from travels to spectacular gardens I have visited around the world. However, my earliest affections for Gaulle and the Low Lands trump the others at this time of renewal. Keukenhof tulips and daffodils in every hue spring to life this season. Monet's iris wave in the wind, wafting their heady perfume my way as I sit in my creek side meditation meadow listening to the gurgling waterfall, the chirping of the nesting songbirds and the

croaking toads' mating dance.

Monet planted to paint. I plant to pray. In these stressful days, my garden decompresses the angst. Gardening is my universal language of love and I luxuriate freely in my Lamorinda cultivation. However mediocre, imperfect, untamed, and unruly, it is my personal masterpiece, my slice of heaven.

I join Monet in exclaiming, "What I need most of all in life is flowers, always, always!"

CYNTHIA'S COMPOST COURSE

My garden is a kaleidoscope of colors and fragrance in April and I have my rich compost to thank for that. Keep your kitchen sink clean with my super simple recipe for success to recycle and repurpose your waste.

1. Keep a bowl or small container under your kitchen sink and every time you prepare any food, put all the scraps, except for meat, into the container. This may contain carrot, banana, onion, garlic, and potato peels, lettuce, all vegetables, tea bags, coffee grounds, bread, eggshells, etc.
2. Empty it each day in a five-gallon bucket in your garage, or to a storage area close to the kitchen. Do not leave outside or you'll attract raccoons, skunks, birds, and deer.
3. When the bucket is filled either dump into a pile you have created specifically for composting or use a purchased bin.
4. Add leaves, grass clippings, wood chips, pine

needles, straw, spent flower arrangements, blossoms, and any other combination of green or brown organic materials that are not diseased. It's best to have three times as much brown ingredients as green.

5. Turn with a pitchfork. As the weather warms, decomposition occurs.
6. When the mixture is rich, crumbly, filled with worms, and smells like the good earth, spread as organic mulch in your garden where it will leech into the soil to fertilize your plants.
7. Voila! Happy, healthy plants.

PERENNIAL FAVORITES FOR MASTER MAKEOVERS

Daffodil	Rhododendron	Dianthus
Tulip	Astilbe	Dahlia
Crocus	Saucer Magnolia	Roses
Freesia	Lavender	Gladioli
Hyacinth	Calendula	Jacobinia
Muscari	Ornamental	Bergenia
Dutch Iris	Grasses	Abelia
Bearded Iris	Delphinium	Plumbago
Daphne	Campanula	Echinacea
Ranunculus	Aster	Columbine
Anemones	Agastache	Digitalis
Agapanthus	Lamium	Artemisia
Clivia	Coreopsis	Shasta Daisy
Kangaroo Paw	Hosta	Ground Covers
Camellia	Ferns	
Azalea	Gaillardia	



A spectacular spring selection of daffodils mingle with long stemmed blue blooming rosemary, a bee's favorite friend.
Photos Cynthia Brian