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Extraordinary Ordinary Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



Pink Zinnia Photos Cynthia Brian

In the late 1990s I wrote, produced, and hosted an award-winning TV series called Live Your Dreams which featured what I termed "extraordinary ordinary" people from all walks of life who were doing what they loved, not for the money, not for the glory, but for the sole reason that it fed their souls. The show was a hit with the multitudes who wanted to follow their hearts, although it never garnered the sponsorship revenue it deserved. Sex and violence were advertisement manna and that program sorely lacked those ingredients.

Walking through a variety of neighborhood gardens, I reminisced on my passion for the simplicity of that program as I witnessed so many exotic specimens dotting landscapes. Whatever happened to the plethora of popular plant players that filled the summertime yards of my youth? Petunias, zinnias, geraniums, four o'clocks, Mexican primrose, tomatillos? I wondered if they were considered too ordinary and not sexy enough for the limelight? I decided to share my insights on these soulful, dreamy creations with you to reignite the flame of simplicity.

Relatively speaking, petunias are pest and disease free and are great in hanging baskets, containers, and beds. They come in a variety of colors and ruffles with the Grandiflora class boasting big blooms and the Multiflora showcasing compact numerous blossoms. They are annuals but deadheading spent blooms keeps the kaleidoscope coming until late fall.

Zinnias were a childhood favorite because they easily grew by seed, with both tall and short samples. We grew bi-colors, streaked, and speckled specimens. My mom taught us to pinch off the first flower buds so that we'd get bushier plants. Since zinnias don't do well in alkaline soil, I toss my coffee grinds on them and they thrive in addition to adding

fertilizer every four to six weeks. Zinnias are perfect starter seeds to interest kids in gardening.

Geraniums remind me of all window boxes filled with cascading color that I experienced in Germany. What I love most about this garden staple is how easy it is to grow from cuttings. All the varieties of geraniums and pelargonium's I treasure were clippings I traded with other gardeners. Propagating is so simple, many are scented, and all flower from spring to winter here in Lamorinda when I cut them back almost to ground level.

Hummingbirds are constant companions of my four o'clocks. Unlike their namesake, they don't keep time in my garden, blooming at ten in the morning instead of four in the afternoon. On our country road when I was growing up on the farm, we could tell the time of day by the four o'clocks. They always opened at exactly 4 p.m. Obviously that source memory didn't continue in my heirloom seeds. Although they are considered annuals, they reseed every year producing bigger, better, more fragrant blooms that kill the black beetles and entice the butterflies.

Although many people call them an invasive weed, Mexican primroses are welcome invaders in my large landscape. Growing wildly with diaphanous white or pink petals that grow in any type of inhospitable soil, they naturalize and may take over if left to their own accord. Be forewarned, this may be an extraordinary plant you don't want, especially in a small garden, as once it takes root, Mexican primroses are almost impossible to eradicate. (Unless you bring in the deer!)

What fruit grows inside its own paper sack tasting like a cross between pineapple, tomato, and lime? It's the tomatillo, a distant cousin of the gooseberry and tomato used especially in Mexican salsas and savory sauces. Tomatillos thrive on neglect and produce hundreds of delicious fruits from late summer to late fall. You'll know when it's time to harvest when the papery husks start to pop. Pick and store for six weeks or more, removing the husk only when ready to eat raw or cook. They reseed themselves supplying the essential ingredient for a sassy salsa verde and tangy salad fresca.

Alas, all of my extraordinary ordinary garden delights are also favorite foods, especially the Mexican primrose, of my dear deer. Currently three bucks, a doe, and her twins have taken up residence in my front yard. They have devoured and decimated these underrated beauties, thus I have been forced to grow them exclusively in the fenced back territory.

As much as I admire the antlered nomads, I deem eating my plants violent acts. If I could consider the house finches that hatched in a nest built in my wreath on my back door "sexy," perhaps sponsors would be interested in a resurrection of Live Your Dreams as a garden program featuring extraordinary, ordinary plants doing what they love!
Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for August

"The world is a book and those who do not travel only read a page." St. Augustine

August is the most traveled month of the year when in some parts of the world entire cities empty of its citizens. Think Paris in August-forget about meeting Parisians, the city has gone on holiday! You will likely meet someone from Lafayette, California in the Galeries Lafayette Grand Magasin. As an avid explorer of our great globe, and a voracious reader and writer, I agree completely with St. Augustine...EXCEPT...in summer I love staying home in Lamorinda. Our weather is glorious, our gardens are spectacular, and it's the best time of the year to gather with friends and family for barbecues, croquet tournaments, concerts in the parks, swim parties, marshmallow roasts, and wine tastings. Enjoy this peaceful paradise we call "home" before the rush of back-to-school begins. This August, travel the world while daydreaming in your garden.

- GRILL your fresh-picked eggplant, corn, watermelon, and peppers on the barbecue. Brush with olive oil and garlic, sprinkle with salt and sage or cilantro.
 - STARGAZE between August 12-14 towards the northeast to watch the Perseids meteor shower. Throw a quilt on the lawn and enjoy the free show with the family.
 - PHOTOGRAPH your end of summer perennials and landscaping. When you are planning your spring plantings this winter you'll be glad you have a record.
 - INDULGE your adventurous nature with a hike on new trail.
 - TUCK sun-seeking succulents such as sedum, echeveria, and sempervivum in containers for summer sizzle and easy maintenance.
 - REPLACE broken wooden handles on shovels, hoes, and trowels.
 - WEAR clothes that cover arms and legs at dawn and dusk and apply the repellent with DEET to protect from mosquito bites.
 - STRETCH before gardening. As gardeners we twist, turn, bend, pull, climb, dump, and lift which can cause back strains.
 - SLATHER on the sunscreen before working in the garden, wear a hat to keep burns and sun stroke at bay, and drink plenty of water to keep hydrated.
 - MUNCH vine ripened tomatoes while enhancing your resistance to UV rays.
 - DIVIDE bearded iris this month. Crowded rhizomes produce no blooms.
 - ENCOURAGE your kids to help you water, weed, and feed. They'll feel proud to contribute while learning about the seasons of life.
 - SOAK citrus and acid loving bushes like rhododendron, azaleas, and camillias to set the buds for next blooming season.
 - PINCH mums and zinnias for a fuller fall show.
 - RECHARGE your batteries in your personal garden oasis. It's free and relieves stress.
 - DEADHEAD annuals and perennials to keep them blooming.
- Be diligent with roses which will bloom until January as long as rosehips are not allowed to form.
- GRAB a great book and let your mind travel. You'll find hundreds of free reviews of books for the entire family at http://www.btsya.com/book_reviews.html
 - BUY a Rose of Sharon in bush or tree form to add instant exotic allure to your yard.
 - ALLOW carrots to go to seed. Not only are the flowers magnificent, you'll get a yield of luscious new carrots next season.
 - PLANT another crop of lettuce, arugula, carrots, beans, and beets to harvest through the end of October. There is nothing better than growing your own healthy, nourishing, life-enhancing food.

Explore, experiment, and experience as you entertain family and friends in your home haven. Happy staycation.

Happy Gardening to You!

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Four O'Clocks

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