

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

Light the night

By Cynthia Brian

“Moon and stars are giving light. With gifts of nature’s giving, we complete the cycle of living. Let us give from our mind, hands, and heart to the world.” – Chitrabhanu



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 show-

cased 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.

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