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Mary's Gardens at the University of Dayton

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DAYTON – This spring the University of Dayton Libraries brought nature inside and brought a piece of history to life. In the first floor exhibit gallery a Mary garden was planted for visitors to enjoy, learn from, and reflect upon the Blessed Virgin Mary. A Mary garden is comprised of flowers and plants whose names describe an aspect of Mary's life, her appearance, or her virtues. For example, prior to the Reformation *Foxglove* was commonly known as *Our Lady's Gloves*. It was a means of storytelling – people could learn about Mary simply by looking at the nature surrounding them. The Mary garden also usually features a cross walkway and a statue of Mary as a focal point to reflect and meditate upon, reminiscent of medieval cloister gardens.

In the 1960's, John S. Stokes, a Philadelphia Quaker who converted to Catholicism, read about a little garden at St. Joseph's Church in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Frances Crane Lillie had learned about Mary gardens through her travels in Europe and decided to create one in Woods Hole, believed to be the very first Mary garden in the United

States. In addition to the garden, she gifted a large stone bell tower to St. Joseph that was visible across the bay at the Marine Biology Laboratory where her husband worked. She said that the tower and garden were "to remind the scientists who study at the Marine Biology Laboratory across the street that there is another and valid aspect of life."

Although Mrs. Lillie had created a beautiful Mary garden at Woods Hole, she envisioned an entire Mary garden movement in which the right steward would come along and make their life's passion to teach people about Mary through the act of gardening. In 1946, John Stokes read an article in *Our Lady's Digest* and, with tears in his eyes, knew that he was the man Mrs. Lillie spoke of and that this was *his* calling. Along with his business partner Edward McTague, they officially founded the business "Mary's Gardens" that compiled research about the origins and history of Marian plant names, and sold seed packets so that anyone could start their own Mary garden.

The John S. Stokes and Mary's Garden collection was donated in 2013 to the Marian Library, a unique special library at the University of Dayton, dedicated to making the Blessed Virgin Mary better known, loved, and served. The exhibit this spring "lived" on three floors. In addition to the Mary garden on the first floor, the second floor presented archival materials



such as correspondence, photographs, and pamphlets collected by Stokes relating to sustainability and social justice. On the seventh floor, the Marian Library gallery featured twenty-four original paintings commissioned by artist Holly Schapker, drawing attention to the relationship between flowers and Mary's life.



The response to the exhibit was overwhelmingly positive. The plants were rotated out of the garden regularly to keep them looking fresh and the flowers removed were actually re-purposed and replanted by a design class. Sections of the garden were updated to reflect each of the four seasons and ecocube planters were sold by the University bookstore so that visitors could start a Mary garden at home. Aside from a few small complications such as the smell of mulch or the wilting tulips before their scheduled rotation, students, staff, and community members have enjoyed walking through the garden or sitting on the nearby bench for a quiet moment of reflection.

John Stokes emphasized that Mary gardens were for everyone – it could be as simple as a small dish garden placed in a windowsill or as unique as a garden inside the library.

Special thanks to the many people who worked on this exhibit, including ARCS member and former Marian Library archivist, Jillian Ewalt, who processed the sixty-linear-foot collection.

