

Mary-Gardening with Saint Francis

introduced by

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We are told St. Francis so loved flowers for their perfection in showing forth God's beauty and splendour that he wanted his Brothers to care for them as gardeners.

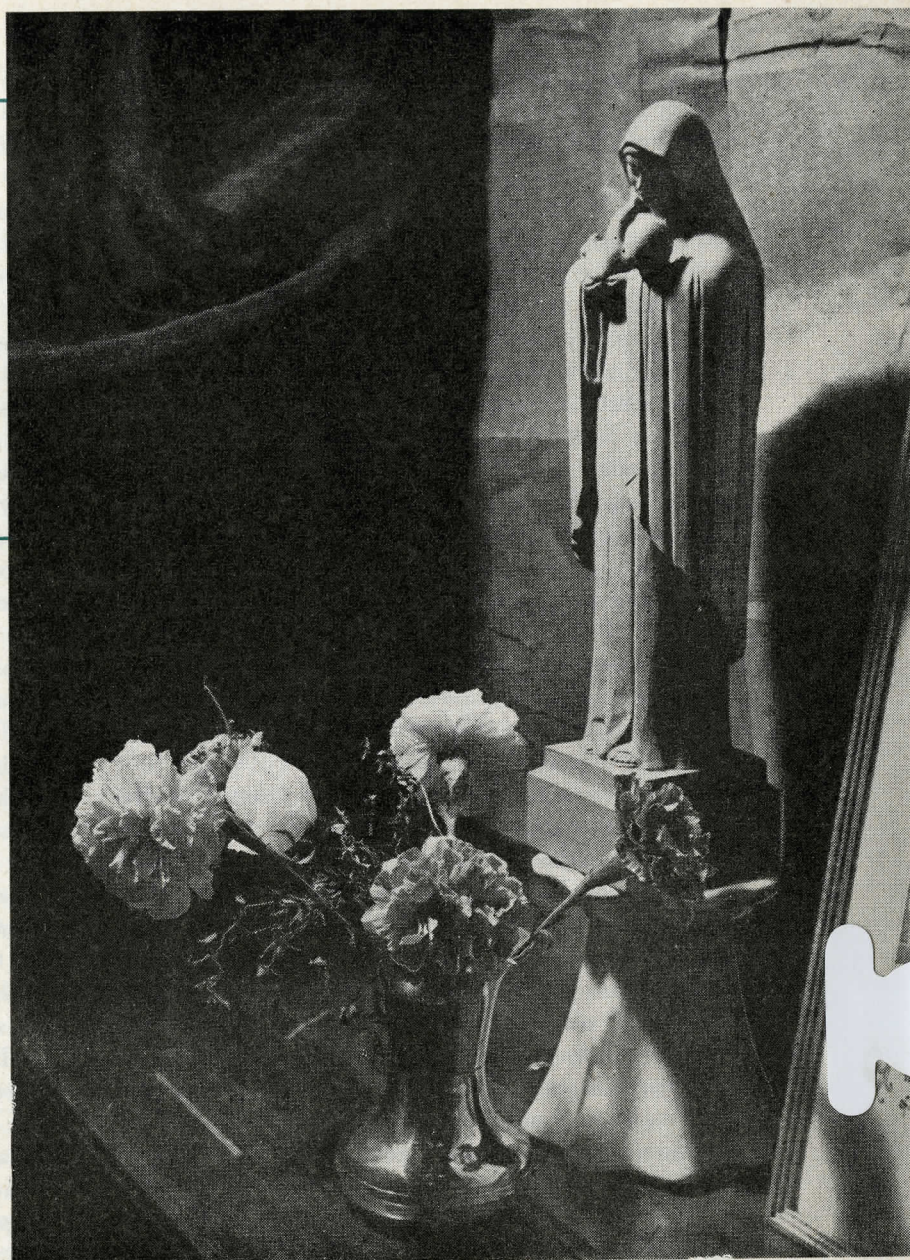
He is said, further, to have taken great care not to harm even the least wayside plant since it might bear a flower, symbol of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Rose of Sharon.

And when asked once while cultivating his garden, "Francis, what would you do if you learned you were to die tomorrow?" he replied, "I would keep on cultivating my garden."

These stories of St. Francis recall for us the dignity of flower gardening in the ages of the faith; a dignity which it can have again today. Flowering plants are riches of heavenly beauty lovingly bestowed upon us by God. Of all His creatures they afford us the most perfect outward likenesses of Mary's interior beauty of soul. And their cultivation can be a work of grateful praise and service to God.

This religious view of flower gardening was lost to an extent in the course of the urbanization and secularization of culture following the Middle Ages. But today a restoration has been begun by dedicated individuals who have founded horticultural societies, garden clubs and gardening magazines to promote parks in every city, gardens in every yard and plants or flowers in every room. Fittingly, St. Francis' loving regard for nature and flowers has been an inspiration for this movement, as witnessed by the many statues of St. Francis in gardens.

Now another movement, the Mary Garden movement, is promoting a further restoration of the religious sense and true dignity of flower gardening. This movement, too, finds inspiration in St. Francis, but in the fullness of his loving care for flowers as God's creatures and as providential reminders of the Blessed Virgin.



To those who love the natural beauty and growth of flowers the Mary Garden movement proposes St. Francis' more perfect love of them for their "divine creaturehood." With St. Francis we are once again to love flowers and all the things of nature as our brothers and sisters, as our fellow creatures of God, showing forth His glory.

We are to reflect also that through our fault, through the fault of our first parents, flowers grow midst thorns and thistles and after blooming for a time wither and die; but through our fulfilment of the work of Christ's redemption they will, after his Second Coming, bloom for ever in a new heaven and a new earth. Christ suffered and died to redeem God's beauty and glory in nature as well as in our souls. Flowers now live and die and live again, reminding us of Our Lord's death and resurrection, but in a little while they will show forth God's glory everlastingly in heaven.

The Mary Garden movement proposes further



them as she nursed the infant Saviour. Another relates that the flowers, Our Lady's Tears, appeared where she wept at the foot of the Cross on Calvary.

Mary's Cross recalls that Mary, our co-redemptrix, offered to the Father and shared interiorly the sufferings of Christ. Mary's Mantle symbolizes her motherly protection of the faithful. Mary's Heart moves us to beseech the intercession of her Immaculate Heart with the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Sweet-smelling herbs, several of them called Sweet Mary, bring to mind Our Lady's spiritual fragrance and her motherly sweetness.

Many of these flowers are still commonly grown in gardens today, although known by other names in our era when the faithful have become accustomed to look for God and Mary in the symbols of the printed page rather than those of nature. And thanks to commercial seedsmen and nurserymen, the necessary seeds, bulbs and plants are readily available to those of us who wish to relearn the beautiful symbolism of Our Lady's Flowers first hand by growing them once again in Mary Gardens. A list of 50 Flowers of Our Lady best suited for cultivation is given at the end of this article.

A Mary Garden planting, large or small, of Our Lady's Flowers is customarily made around a statue or shrine of the Virgin or the Virgin and Child. The flowers serve as a setting for the statue, and the statue serves in turn as a centre from which Our Lady's attributes shine out as it were onto the surrounding flowers. Then, after the symbolism of the flowers has lifted our thoughts to meditation on Our Lady's life and mysteries, the statue serves as a focal point which brings them to repose in simple contemplation of Mary and her Divine Son.

As we approach the garden our first sense is of peace and joy. Beholding it in its entirety with its trees and shrubs, its plants and flowers, its birds and bees, in the sun and breeze, we are moved to offer praise and thanksgiving to the Creator with the overflowing joy of St. Francis' *Hymn to the Sun*.

Approaching closer, we see that the beauty of the garden has been composed and offered around the image of Mary, the Mother of God, as a hymn of veneration, in which we are drawn to join interiorly. Then, considering the surrounding flowers as symbols of Mary's immaculate purity, the beauty of her holiness and the splendour of her heavenly

glory, we praise, bless and thank God for His great glory as magnified in the soul of Mary.

As we enter and walk through the garden, the symbolism of the familiar shapes and colours of the individual flowers lifts our thoughts to meditation on Our Lady's life and mysteries. Meditating thus, we are moved to praise God for the privileges and graces he bestowed on Mary for her chosen rôle as His mother, companion and cooperator in the work of human redemption. At the same time we rejoice in Mary's love of God and her perfect obedience to His will, which serve as the model and inspiration for our own love and service of God. Reminded in this way of how pleasing Mary must be to God, and of His appointment of her as our heavenly mother and mediatrix, the instrument of His mercy, we confidently beseech her to pray to Him for us and to make our prayers hers.

As we turn to the work of cultivating the flowers, we consider them anew with special attention to their life and death, which in turn bring to mind the redeeming life and death of Christ. The symbolical forms of certain plants and flowers have recalled for us the lash, the crown of thorns, the cross and other instruments of the Passion, but now the withering and dying of the very life of the plants recall Christ's death by a more direct and real analogy. Thus, the same plants which moved us on entering the garden to share in St. Francis' joy over the praise returned by creatures to the Creator now remind us to share also in his compassionate and sorrowful interior union with the suffering and death of the Redeemer.

Mindful of the continuation of the sacrifice of Calvary through the ages in the sacrifice of the Mass, we join the intentions of our gardening work with all the Masses being offered in various places at that very moment. We rejoice that many of the flowers we are cultivating will be used to adorn the church altar, representing there at the offertory of the Mass our garden labours and the joys and sorrows of the seasons. And we turn with particular affection to those flowers which we are growing for the liturgical feast days with which they are especially identified by name or traditional use.

After completing our gardening tasks we rest, finally, in simple contemplation of Mary and Jesus and of the mysteries of the incarnation and redemption. Then, filled with the Peace of Christ, we leave the garden, praying with St. Francis that we may be made the instruments of that peace: where there is hatred sowing love, where there is injury — pardon, where there is doubt — faith, where there is despair — hope, where there is darkness — light, where there is sadness — joy.



that we should reacquire St. Francis' special love for each flower because it is a symbol of the Blessed Virgin. We owe the beginnings of the flower symbolism of Mary to Christians who lived before St. Francis, and its full development, including the custom of growing flowers symbolical of Our Lady in "Mary Gardens" to others after him; but St. Francis is the inspiration for our grateful love of each and every flower for its inherent likeness to Our Lady. This love is firmly grounded in two great Christian discoveries: that meditation on the life of the Mother of God, imitation of her virtues and dedication to her service are a swift, sure road to knowledge, love and service of God; and that of all God's earthly creatures none can surpass flowers in suggesting for our meditation the immaculateness of Mary's purity, the beauty of her holiness or the splendour of her glory.

When flower gardening is inspired and motivated by St. Francis' grateful love of flowers as God's creatures and as symbols of Mary, it is a work of the highest dignity. As a work of love it engenders a desire to learn and to practise the garden arts and sciences, in collaboration with God's providence, as perfectly as possible in order to nurture the finest plants and flowers. Interiorly, its humble submission to the needs of plant creatures in the spirit of St. Francis and its faithful stewardship for them year in and year out can be a demanding work of sacrifice and penance.

Since the time of St. Francis the findings of botany and biology and of physics and chemistry have heightened our appreciation of the wondrous perfection of the eternal Creator, as manifested in the diversity, the intricate structure and the total order of His plant creatures. Likewise, the development of flower symbolism of Our Lady since St. Francis has provided, if possible, even further motives for loving and caring for flowers.

Beginning with the inherent likeness of all flowers to Mary's pure beauty of soul, the ingenuity of Christian love discovered numerous reminders of Our Lady's life and mysteries in the characteristic forms and colours and seasons of individual flower species. Research into the medieval flower symbolism of England, Ireland, Germany, Flanders, France, Italy and other countries of Christendom has recorded some 700 symbolical associations of flowers with the Blessed Virgin. These form a veritable litany or encyclopædia of Mary written with the immaculate petals and foliage of flowers much as

all her actions were infused with her purity.

The Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valleys were biblical titles applied to the Virgin by the Church Fathers from the Cantic of Canticles, in which they saw her typified as the mystical bride of God. These titles were then given to flowers considered as fitting embodiments of this symbolism of Our Lady. Similarly, the Church gave Mary the title, Mystical Rose, preserved today in the Litany of Loreto; and several rose varieties came to be known as Mary's Rose. The rose symbolism was extended to a number of rose-like flowers such as the peony, which was likewise called Mary's Rose.

The rose was also adopted as the emblem of Mary's love of God. Other flower symbols of Our Lady's virtues and attributes included the lily representing her purity, the myrtle her virginity, the violet her humility and the marigold her heavenly glory. St. Bernard spoke of Our Lady as the violet of humility, the lily of chastity, and the rose of charity; and also as the balm of Gilead and the golden gillyflower of heaven.

The prayers of the Rosary were considered a garden of roses offered to Mary, an adornment of her image, a symbol of her graces. Various flowers recalled the individual mysteries of the Rosary: the Madonna Lily the Annunciation, Our Lady's Slippers the Visitation; Our Lady's Bedstraw the Nativity . . . and so on through the Assumption Lily and Mary's Crown. In general, white flowers symbolized Mary's joys, red flowers her sorrows and yellow or gold flowers her glories. Some flowers, such as Purification Flower and Our Lady's Birthday Flower were associated with Our Lady's life and mysteries through her liturgical feast days, the "Lady Days", for which they bloomed each year.

A large group of flowers were known by names denoting their fancied resemblance to Mary's pure eyes or to her tresses, hands or fingers. Others were seen to be her mantle, smock, belt or shoes; or her pins, needles, thread or sewing work, as though everything she touched partook of her purity. Typical of the many folk-legends woven around the Mary-named flowers is one telling that the white markings on the leaves of Our Lady's Thistle and certain other plants first appeared when drops of the Virgin Mother's immaculate milk dropped on





GUIDE TO YOUR MARY-GARDEN



Your Mary Gardens can be small or large: a small bed of flowers at the foot of Our Lady's statue or shrine, or a larger garden around it or leading up to it.

Begin your garden with Flowers of Our Lady already familiar to you or commonly grown in your neighbourhood. Then add others, choosing from the following list of fifty of her flowers most widely grown in the United States.

I. Basic planting of perennial plants for bloom year after year:

LOW	MEDIUM	TALL
Snow Drop: <i>Candlemas Bells</i>	Solomon's Seal: <i>O. L. Lockets</i>	Wild Rose: <i>Mary's Rose</i>
Violet: <i>O. L. Modesty</i>	Bleeding Heart: <i>Mary's Heart</i>	Peony: <i>Mary's Rose</i>
Rock Cress: <i>O. L. Cushion</i>	Columbine: <i>O. L. Shoes</i>	Madonna Lily: <i>Mary's Lily</i>
Primrose: <i>O. L. Keys</i>	Rosemary*: <i>Legend of O. L.</i>	Bell Flower: <i>O. L. Bells</i>
Lily-of-the-Valley: <i>O. L. Tears</i>	Spiderwort: <i>O. L. Tears</i>	Bebalm: <i>Sweet Mary</i>
Sea Pink: <i>O. L. Pincushion</i>	Iris: <i>Mary's Sword</i>	Gladiolus: <i>Emblem of Incarnation</i>
Star of Bethlehem: <i>O. L. Tears</i>	Fuchsia*: <i>O. L. Eardrops</i>	Aster: <i>O. L. Birthday Flower</i>
Easter Bells: <i>O. L. Buttons</i>	Red Valerian: <i>O. L. Needlework</i>	Monk's Hood: <i>O. L. Slipper</i>
Garden Pink: <i>Virgin's Pink</i>	Rose Campion: <i>Mary's Rose</i>	Chrysanthemum: <i>Legend of Epiphany</i>
Harebell: <i>O. L. Thimble</i>	Plantain Lily: <i>Assumption Lily</i>	* (take indoors for winter)
	Daisy: <i>Mary's Star</i>	

II. Biennial plants replaced each spring (started from seed previous year):

Pansy: <i>O. L. Delight</i>	Sweet William: <i>O. L. Tuft</i>	Foxglove: <i>O. L. Gloves</i>
English Daisy: <i>Mary's Rose</i>	Milk Thistle: <i>O. L. Thistle</i>	Canterbury Bells: <i>O. L. Nightcap</i>
Forget-me-not: <i>Eyes of Mary</i>		Hollyhock: <i>St. Joseph's Staff</i>
		Giant Mullein: <i>O. L. Candle</i>

III. Annual plants started from seed each spring (easily started indoors):

Virginian Stock: <i>Virgin's Cross</i>	Sweet Wm. Catchfly: <i>Mary's Rose</i>	Giant Marigolds: <i>Mary's Gold</i>
Dwarf Marigolds: <i>Mary's Gold</i>	Calendula: <i>Mary's Bud</i>	Annual Chrysanthemum: <i>Mary's Gold</i>
	Hybrid Marigolds: <i>Mary's Gold</i>	Morning Glory Vine: <i>O. L. Mantle</i>
	Ladyslipper Balsam: <i>O. L. Earrings</i>	Sweet Scabious: <i>O. L. Pincushion</i>
		Larkspur: <i>Mary's Tears</i>

Seeds, bulbs or plants of these and many more Flowers of Our Lady, detailed gardening instructions, outdoor statues and shrines, and further literature on the Mary Garden idea and movement are all available from Mary's Gardens, Philadelphia. For complete information write to:

MARY'S GARDENS
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