

A Garden for Our Lady

Honoring Mary with Plants

By Kara Storey



Walter and Chloe Pugh were shopping for Mary Garden supplies when Walter proposed. (Photos submitted by Walter Pugh)

With a list in hand, Chloe Pugh perused the flower aisles at a Kansas City greenhouse last May. She had come with her boyfriend, Walter, to select flowers for a Mary Garden they were planting at Walter's residence.

Walter had other things on his mind. Namely, he was waiting for just the right moment to get down on his knee and ask Chloe to marry him.

"Our parish priest had encouraged us to do something in honor of Our Lady for the month of May," said Walter, 29, adding that the greenhouse had been their first date spot. "The garden was actually Chloe's idea, I just hijacked it for the proposal."

The Pughs, who married at the end of 2023 and now live in Wichita, Kansas, were both familiar with Mary Gardens but had never grown one. Chloe, a 24-year-old nurse, first heard about the concept of a Mary Garden in a Catholic women's group at Benedictine College. Walter, a flight instructor, said he came across the idea during his time as a seminarian and monk at Conception Abbey in Missouri, where he became interested in the tradition of monastery courtyard gardens.

The history

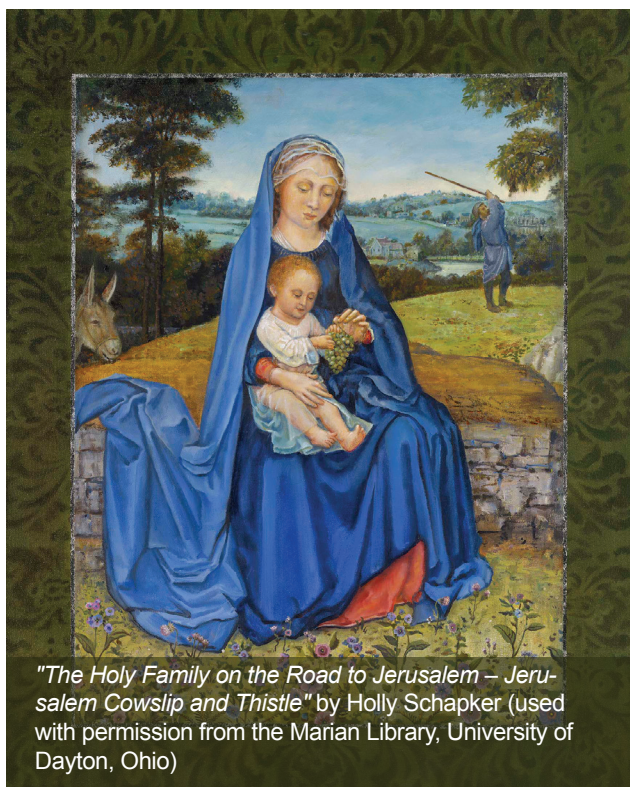
According to Kayla Harris, director of the Marian Library at the University of Dayton, the notion of Mary Gardens first sprang

up in medieval times.

"Back in medieval times, pre-Reformation, when you wanted to tell stories about Mary's virtues or stories in the Bible, you used flowers and plants as visual cues or reminders," she said. "For example, you're walking down the path and you see a certain flower, and maybe that's Mary's tears, and you would use that to tell the story of the passion of the cross."

Many plants and flowers were also associated with various religious legends, Harris added. One such legend pertains to the Star of Bethlehem, a star-shaped flower that serves as a reminder of the star that shone in the sky following the birth of Jesus.

"Another story associated with



"The Holy Family on the Road to Jerusalem – Jerusalem Cowslip and Thistle" by Holly Schapker (used with permission from the Marian Library, University of Dayton, Ohio)

this flower is that when Mary held up Jesus after he was born, she wept at how majestic he was, and then these flowers sprang from her tears," Harris said. "There's never really just one story because they're retold, passed down through generations. So one particular plant could have different versions, or there could be different plants that are associated with the same story."

Sadly, when the English Reformation happened, the Marian names were lost. For instance, "Our Lady's Gloves" went back to its secular name of foxglove, Harris added.

Then in 1951, following a "lightning bolt conversion" to Catholicism in a garden, John S. Stokes, Jr., an engineer from Philadelphia, established "Mary's Gardens" to research the hundreds of flowers used in medieval times to symbolize the life and attributes of Mary. He traveled to do his research, taking handwritten notes from fact-finding missions to places like the Harvard library.

When it came to the logistics of growing a Mary Garden, Stokes turned to one in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, which was established in 1932 by Frances Crane Lillie, an early follower of Catholic Rural Life. Still existing today, this was the first public Mary Garden in the United States.

From there, Stokes decided that everyone must have the opportunity to plant a

Mary Garden. He created a small business, Harris said, where together with his business partner he sold seeds and put out brochure packets, educating people on Marian plant names and giving tips on how to plant Mary Gardens at their own homes.

"He saw this as like a revival," Harris said. "By sharing it through seed packets or other items, he hoped people would find joy in it as well and plant their own Mary Gardens, ultimately finding their way to devotion to Mary through nature, through these spaces. He wanted it to be this kind of living movement."

It's a movement that in recent years has started to see a resurgence, thanks in part to the work done by Harris' library. A few years after Stokes died in 2007, all of his research was donated to the Marian Library—100

boxes of materials, one of which contained an old National Catholic Rural Life brochure. The library has migrated Stokes' documents to its website, making Mary Garden history, plant lists, and garden plans free and easily accessible to the public.

"People contact us every spring because they come across the website and want to learn about Mary Gardens," Harris said. "There are also people who have always kind of had a Mary Garden but didn't realize it was a thing. They may have had a statue of Mary in their garden, but they didn't know about the plant names and the flower names."

Place of prayer

Thanks to their engagement and subsequent surprise party, the Pughs had to wait a day to plant their garden. But the couple says it was worth it. They selected a shaded area next to the house that already had a Mary statue and roses, adding pansies, marigolds, salvia, and thyme from the greenhouse.

It became a place where the couple experienced gentle reminders of the Blessed Mother's love for them. Inspired by their pastor, they would pray short, simple prayers each time they'd pass by it or work in it.



The Pughs' 2023 Mary Garden.

“Mine was ‘Mary, be with me,’ or ‘Mary, help me to be more like you,’” Chloe said. “It was really helpful for me to recall that Mary is this woman who is an example to me, and I can cultivate these virtues or graces that she has by praying with her, being with her, spending time with her, and tilling the garden that she’s inhabiting.”

Now that the couple is beginning their married lives in Wichita, they said they are starting to think about where to plant their new Mary Garden. Their first order of business is to find an outdoor Mary statue.

Garden advice

The Pughs insisted that anyone interested in growing a Mary Garden should not be intimidated. Work with what you’re given, they said, whether the space is small or large, overgrown or perfectly prepared.

“Each garden is going to look different, but each will be beautiful, especially if it’s built intending to glorify Mary and glorify God,” Chloe said. “It’s really easy to get caught up in, ‘This list is exactly what I have to follow, and if I don’t follow it perfectly, then it’s not right and this garden isn’t a Marian garden anymore.’”

To Walter, winging it a bit produces a more authentic garden.

“Even the medievals would have found an association between whatever flowers they were using,” he said. “Take thyme for instance. Traditionally it’s referred to as ‘The Virgin’s Humility,’ but I didn’t know that in the moment we were planting it. Thyme was something that was beautiful, worked with what we were trying to do, and frankly, I really love cooking, so I would have gladly planted all herbs.”

Flowers of Mary

Here is a sampling of some of the religious names for common plants. There are over 140 plants in the Marian Library’s database.

Annual Larkspur
Mary’s Tears



Baby’s Breath
Our Lady’s Veil



Bleeding Heart
Mary’s Heart



Forget-Me-Nots
Eyes of Mary



Gladiolus
Ladder to Heaven



Hollyhock
St. Joseph’s Staff



Marigold
Mary’s Gold



Morning Glory
Our Lady’s Mantle



Peony
Pentecost Rose



Violet
Our Lady’s Modesty



Taken from John Stokes and *Mary’s Gardens*, Marian Library, University of Dayton.