

In Mary's Garden

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A founder of MARY'S GARDENS instructs his little girl in things named for God's Mother.

Surrounded by the manufactured products, paved streets, stone and steel buildings of our city culture, we have lost our sense for the potency of plant life. For nature has provided a providential means for instructing children in virtue and in knowledge and love of God and of Our Lady.

One means of restoring this sense is to undertake the cultivation of a Mary Garden . . . a garden - large or small - comprised of plants and blooms which were named for Our Lady in the old popular religious traditions of pre-Reformation Catholic England. Such a garden affords souls a nourishment which has been distilled from centuries of popular devotion, and contains a richness and vigor not to be found in books and classrooms.

This is the story of how a Mary Garden afforded one father an opportunity for instruction of his pre-school child in spiritual things and in God's artistry, science and riches as He manifests them in nature. Here is how one daughter's heart, touched by plant life named for Mary, was led to divine thought and to the appreciation of the things of God and garden as the signatures and, when blessed, sacramentals they truly are. In what follows are reported a little girl's actual actions and remarks, and, in so far as transcription allows, the teaching of

her father, who learned a great deal!

Anne is five.

"Let's put up the new shrine in Our Lady's Garden" said Daddy on one warm day in early March. Overjoyed, Anne helped Daddy mount the little wayside shrine on its pole in back of the Mary Garden pool. Now, as Our Lady adored the infant Savior in her arms, all was in readiness for the spring sun to raise up the Mary plants and blooms in a litany of praises to their Queen.

But first came tributes from the neighbors. The very next evening Anne had news for Daddy: "Do you know what Tommy from next door did? He knelt down and said a prayer to Our Lady in her little house."

Next came the birds, who wove a nest of twigs about the half-kneeling figure of Our Lady. Who can tell what instinctive or providential purpose they accomplished? Yet all was simple and clear to Anne: "They saw there wasn't any straw in the manger."

Soon, from under a late March snow, appeared the first "Mary" flower blooms, Virgin's Tears (pulmonary) . . . recalling Our Lady's tears on Calvary, where it is said her eyes were still as blue as the flowers, but the lids were red as the buds. Schooled by the birds, Anne placed them in the shrine at Our Lady's feet.

With April showers came others of Our Lady's early perennial flowers: the pendant yellow bloom clusters of Our Lady's Keys (cowslip); the dainty blue blossoms called Eyes of Mary (forget-me-not); the ever-loved Our Lady's Delight (pansy), Easter Flower (candytuft) and Virgin Flower (periwinkle).

When Anne asked "Where did Virgin Flower get its name?", Daddy explained, "From its beautiful blue color. White and blue are Mary's colors: white for her immaculate purity and blue for her fullness of grace."

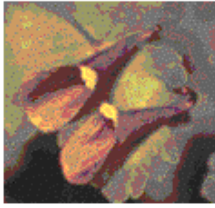
Then in Mary's month of May, Anne presented her with pins from her Pincushion (thrift), with her Shoes (fallen columbine petals) and with her Our Lady's Thimble (bluebells of Scotland).

"Look, Daddy! Our Lady's Shoes"

June gave red roses for the Mystical Rose and Madonna's Pins. Also her biennial flowers: Our Lady's Gloves (foxglove), Our Lady's Nightcap (Canterbury bells), Mary's Candle (mullein) . . .; and more perennials: Mary's Hand (five fingers), Rose of Mary (rose campion), and Madonna Lily.

Summer's hot sun brought out Mary's Gold (marigold), Mary's Bud (calendula), Our Lady's Earrings (balsam), Mary's Thistle (blessed thistle), St. Joseph's Staff (hollyhock) and other annual flowers started from seed sown by Anne in early spring in little containers of soil in a sunny window sill indoors.

Mary's Garden



Mary's Shoes

In summer came new perennial blooms, too: Our Lady by-the-gate (soapwort), Mary's Slippers (monkshood), and, in August, Assumption Lily (hosta). Late in the summer, Our Lady' Birthday Flower (aster) opened its petals.

And finally, midst the autumn leaves, the year's litany was completed as Anne offered up chrysanthemums - which were first so offered, a legend tells us, one night 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, where the Wise Men who had come from afar found them blooming before the entrance to the manger. From the likeness of the golden blooms to the star above their heads, the Wise Men knew they had found the dwelling they sought. Gathering the flowers as Our Lady's gifts, they entered in and placed them in the outstretched hand of Him Whom they had come to adore - the infant Savior, in His Mother's arms.

Each bloom in Our Lady's Garden had its own special joys, too, as well as its season:

"Look, Daddy, Our Lady's Gloves (foxglove blossoms) on my fingers. . . . Our Lady must have lots of fun blowing out all her Mary's Candle (mullein). I'll bet she blows them out as fast as they bloom. . . . I took a little piece of Our Lady's Bedstraw (yellow bedstraw). I'm sure Baby Jesus didn't mind, because He was sleeping. . . . I took it very gently so as not to wake Him." Nor was practicality overlooked: "Let me put Our Lady's Pincushion (scabiosa) up where she can reach it. . . . Look how many Our Lady's Keys (primrose) Our Lady has. That's so she won't have to worry if she loses one. . . . How will Our Lady put on her Our Lady's Earrings (balsam)? I know what I'll do; I'll tell her to scotch tape them on. . . . Let's see if Our Lady's Nightcap (Canterbury Bells) fits her."

Our Lady's Delight (pansy) raised a new question: "Where does Our Lady wear her Delight? Where does it go on her?"

"She can wear it any place she chooses - in her hair, or on her dress. But its name comes from the joy and happiness it brings her." . . .

"Why does it make her happy?"

"Because God made it so beautiful it reminds her of Him." . . .

"Look, here's one I'd like most of all to wear in my hair. That's the one I'll give to Our Lady. "



"I think I'll give this one to Our Lady" (Note Manger Straw Nest, woven by birds)

Some of the blooms took on new names. To Anne the little braidlike spikelets of Our Lady's Tresses (quaking grass) became Our Lady's Braids. Our Lady's Fingers (honeysuckle buds) were Our Lady's Honey. And candytuft (Easter flower) was Our Lady's Candy. All the vegetables, too, were grown for Our Lady.

One Sunday in July, Anne brought back some raspberries a neighbor had given her: "Daddy, I wish we had some raspberries growing in our garden." A few minutes later she made a discovery: "What are those red things in the hedge behind Our Lady's little house? Look, Daddy, we have raspberries, too. Our Lady gave us some raspberries."

Joy welled up in Daddy's heart as Anne picked the first berries and gave them to Our Lady. Two raspberry bushes were indeed growing up inside the hedge; but this was the first year Daddy had delayed in clipping the hedge so late in the season as to permit the raspberries to ripen and show themselves.

Later when Daddy and Anne came back from Mass, the raspberries she had placed in Our Lady's shrine were gone. Anne joyfully proposed:

"Do you know what Our Lady did with them? I think she took them up into the sky. The real Mary came down and ate the raspberries and spilled some drops on the dress of the pretend Mary so we would think the pretend Mary ate them. Then she went up into the sky? Didn't she?"

"Well, it could be. But maybe she sent the birds to get them, just the way the birds brought straw for the manger."

"Maybe some angels came down and got them for her."

Daddy taught Anne to make each gift to Our Lady a prayer: "Be sure you offer up a little prayer to Our Lady each time you make her a present. Prayers are what she likes most. And the flowers can show you how to pray the Rosary, too. Offer up the prayers for each bead just the way you give her roses and other flowers."

Recalling the number of beads on her Rosary, Anne saw another possibility: "Maybe we could say the Rosary out in the garden, and every time we say a Hail Mary we could give Our Lady a flower. Pretty soon she'd be all covered up with flowers, so we wouldn't see her. But we'd know she was still there. Wouldn't we?"

"Yes, we would. Our Lady never leaves us. And while she may not have room in her little house for all the flowers she gets, she can never get too many prayers."

Later, one night, when Daddy asked Anne why she paused so long between Rosary beads, she reminded him with a gesture: "I have to go back to the garden each time to get another flower."

Daddy reminded her, "All white flowers are for the Joyful Mysteries, red ones for the Sorrowful Mysteries, and Gold for the Glorious Mysteries."

By tending the wonders of plant life, from the sowing of seed in the spring to the collecting of new seed in the fall, Anne learned to prize seeds and plants as well as blooms. She had no desire to improve the appearance of the garden if it meant the loss of seeds:

"Now don't you ever pull off any more dead blooms or seed pods in Our Lady's garden because I want lots of seeds. I want to have lots of flowers for Our Lady next year." As it is God Who gives life to the seeds, our work is essentially one of stewardship: "Daddy, I want you to come out and help the garden every day." And God, the provident Gardener, makes His own sowings of seeds, too: "We planted these flowers here, but God planted those over there. I think He sent one of His angels down to plant them for us."

And all garden work took on a special meaning . . . performed as it was for Our Lady and her Divine Son and Lord. Anne was as joyous in carrying dead plants to the compost heap - to provide rich, black leaf mold for digging back into the garden beds in the fall - as she was in offering up the blooms as gifts: "I'm not doing this work for you, Daddy. I'm doing it for Our Lady."

In due time, though, certain things began to puzzle Anne. It seemed that all was not well in Our Lady's Garden: "Daddy, there's one of those bad bees."

"He's not a bad bee. He's a good bee. He's carrying pollen on his legs from flower to flower to help make seeds. And at the same time he's gathering nectar to make honey for us. If there weren't any bees we'd have to spend lots of time taking pollen from flower to flower ourselves, or there wouldn't be any seeds. Bees help the flowers, just as in another way the worms help prepare the ground for the roots."

"Yes, but one stung me."

"He only stung you when you stepped on him."

"But why did he sting me?"

"So you would take your foot off and be more careful next time."

A little later she asked: "Doesn't it hurt Our Lady's Mint [spearmint] when we break off its leaves to eat them?"

"No, Sweetie, it doesn't hurt it. God gives us plants for our food; and cutting them back often helps them. In the fall God withers them back down to the roots with the cold, and many of them grow up again in the spring better than ever."

But as time went on other things happened in the garden which were more difficult for Anne to reconcile with God's goodness. "Why didn't any of those seeds come up? . . . Why is that plant getting all black before it even has any flowers on it? . . . Why does God keep making those bad mosquitoes? . . . Why doesn't someone tell Him to stop?"

From these questions, Daddy could see that Anne had reached the point where she was ready for instruction regarding God's permissive providence: that He permits certain evils only that He may bring from them still greater good. The simplified story:

"In the beginning, when God first made the world for us, everything in it was very good, and He promised the first daddy and mother, Adam and Eve, that if they obeyed Him, and took care of the world for Him, He would lead them right up to Heaven to live with Him and the good angels.

"But Satan, the leader of the bad angels who didn't love God, tempted Adam and Eve to enjoy the good things of the world as they pleased, instead of taking care of them for God. Listening to Satan, they took some fruit from a tree God had told them not to touch. As soon as they did, a terrible thing happened. All the good things of the world were hurt and upset; and God sent an angel with a flaming sword to protect the tree so they couldn't take more fruit, and in this way hurt the world still further.

"Most terrible of all, God punished Adam and Eve by closing the doors of Heaven. That's how the things got started that you see hurting the garden. Satan and Adam and Eve started them, not God.

"Today we still have all the good thing of the world - like seeds, plants, and blooms - to show us how wonderful and good God is, Who made them for us. More than this: God loves us so much that He gave us His only Son, Jesus, to open up the way to Heaven again. And Jesus, in turn, gave us His Mother as our heavenly Mother to protect us, help us, and show us the way to Him - which is why we love her and pray to her, and why we plant flowers which honor her and help us to think of her all the time.

"And by letting the world stay hurt, after what Adam and Eve did, God is good to us in still another way. Through the hurts and pains of the world, He never lets us forget - as did Adam and Eve - that our true happiness is not on earth, but in Heaven with Him where everything is good. That's where God wants us to be because He loves us and made us for His own."

"But Daddy, I do want to go to Heaven."

"Then be sure you always love God and do what He wants you to do."

"But I do love God."

"Well, you should show Him you love Him. Show Him you love Him more than you love the good things of the world. Bring Him other gifts, just the way you bring Him flowers. Mary wants us to give us good things to God, the way her Jesus gave up His life on the Cross."

Looking back, it seemed to Daddy that perhaps the greatest joy for him was the day Anne learned of Our Mother of Sorrows. Late one evening she climbed out of bed and came over to Daddy's desk. Seeing the word "Mary" at the top of a page he was reading, she asked:

"Daddy, why are you reading about Mary?"

"Because I love her very much."

"But some people don't love her. And sometimes she cries."

"How do you know that?"

"Because if she didn't, there wouldn't be any Our Lady's Tears (*Tradescantia*) in the garden. There wouldn't be the little blue teardrops on the flowers."

"Yes, Darling, I'm afraid she does cry, very much. But she cries mostly for another reason."

"Why?"

"Because there are some people who don't love her Jesus or do what He wants them to do."

"But I love Mary and Jesus."

"You won't make Mary cry then, will you?"

"No, she won't cry so long as I am good."

"God bless you, Dearest. Now run along to bed."

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List of plants referred to in story, in order of mention

Religious Name	Common Name	Botanical Name
Virgin's Tears	Lungwort	<i>Pulmonaria officinalis</i>
Our Lady's Keys	Cowslip Primrose	<i>Primula veris</i>
Eyes of Mary	Forget-me-not	<i>Myosotis alpestris</i>
Our Lady's Delight	Pansy	<i>Viola tricolor</i>
Pincushion	Thrift	<i>Armeria mariima</i>
Shoes	Columbine	<i>Aquilegia vulgaris</i>
Our Lady's Thimble	Bluebells of Scotland	<i>Campanula rotundifolia</i>
Madonna's Pins	Wild Geranium	<i>Geranium maculatum</i>
Mystical Rose	Rose	<i>Rosa</i>
Our Lady's Gloves	Foxglove	<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>
Our Lady's Nightcap	Canterbury Bells	<i>Campanula medium</i>
Mary's Candle	Giant Mullein	<i>Verbascum thapsus</i>
Mary's Hand	Five Fingers	<i>Potentilla nepalensis</i>
Rose of Mary	Rose Campion	<i>Lychnis coronaria</i>
Madonna Lily	Madonna Lily	<i>Lilium candidum</i>
Mary's Gold	Marigold	<i>Tagetes</i>
Mary's Bud	Pot Marigold	<i>Calendula officinalis</i>
Our Lady's Earrings	Garden Balsam	<i>Impatiens balsaminum</i>

Mary's Thistle	Blessed Thistle	<i>Silybum marianum</i>
Virgin Flower	Periwinkle	<i>Vinca minor</i>
St. Joseph's Staff	Hollyhock	<i>Althea rosea</i>
Mary's Slippers	Monkshood	<i>Aconitum napellus</i>
Our Lady by-the-gate	Soapwort	<i>Saponaria officinalis</i>
Assumption Lily	Funkia	<i>Hosta plantaginea</i>
O. L. Birthday Flower	Early Aster	<i>Aster amellus</i>
chrysanthemums	Chrysanthemum	<i>Chrysanthemum</i>
Our Lady's Bedstraw	Yellow Bedstraw	<i>Gallium verum</i>
Our Lady's Pincushion	Scabiosa	<i>Scabiosa atropurpurea</i>
Our Lady's Fingers	Honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera caprifolium</i>
Easter Flower	Candytuft	<i>Iberis semperflorens</i>
Our Lady's Tears	Spiderwort	<i>Tradescantia virginiana</i>