

How does your garden grow?

Plant a place for peace and prayer by dedicating your perennials and plants to Mary.

ONE OF MY FAVORITE CHILDHOOD PLACES AT MY grandparents' house was a small garden in the narrow side yard where a statue of Mary stood behind a small pond of water. In the spring tulips ringed the pond. The space **spoke to me** of peace, serenity, stillness — things I felt drawn to even at a young age.

Years later when I was an adult with my own apartment but no yard, a friend gave me a 3-foot-tall statue of Mary. I didn't have a special devotion to her and wasn't sure about the purpose of the gift. But when I began working as a freelance writer and set up an office in my apartment, that seemed like a good place for the statue. After all, I would need special blessings if I were going to make a living and not starve to death. Besides that, I was striving to say, "Thy will be done," and perhaps Mary could help me.

Mary stood in my office for 10 years, mostly neglected as stacks of files and magazines surrounded her. Still, she reminded me to incorporate moments of stillness and prayer into my work day.

When I finally moved into my first house, it offered a better spot for her—a flower garden in the front yard. I wanted, as my grandparents had done, to have a special spot dedicated to Mary, a Marian garden that honored her example. It would be a place to plant and pray and weed and meditate and share some of her beauty — and the flowers that surrounded her — with the world.

It was a bold step in this small, very Protestant Kentucky town. But my husband liked the idea because he came from Kentucky's Catholic heartland where statues of Mary commonly stand in front of houses. Then, before I even considered what to plant, a friend called to say she was moving from her home and didn't want to leave her beloved flowers. If she dug them up and brought them to me, could I find a place for them? And so began our Marian garden.

A couple of years later I discovered a book that told me I was carrying on an old tradition. In *Mary's Flowers* (St. Anthony Messenger), Vincenzina Krymow writes that the ear-

liest known Mary gardens existed in cloistered monasteries. Records from the 13th century indicate that religious institutions set aside special places for reflection dedicated to Mary.

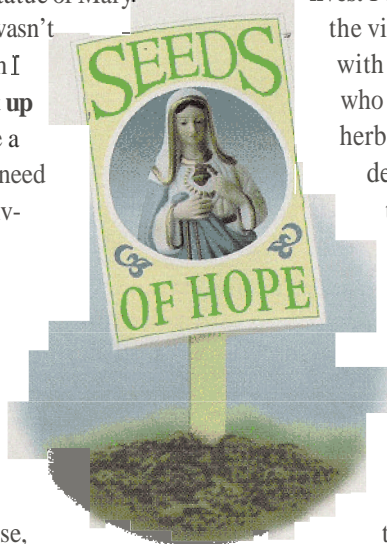
Krymow also writes about how Christians in the Middle Ages kept the memory of Mary alive through legends associated with flowers. Seeing her attributes in flowers and herbs reminded them of the model she provided for their lives. For example, the lily symbolizes chastity and the violet, humility. Roses have been associated with martyrdom, love, and heavenly joy. People who wanted to honor Mary planted flowers and herbs associated with her in special prayer gardens that included some depiction of Mary, typically a statue.

This tradition has evolved. Today churches plant Marian gardens for parishioners to enjoy. Individuals who do not have outdoor garden space or who don't like to garden outdoors have created indoor Marian gardens. (If only I had known that when Mary was languishing among my papers!) Some who prefer not to "plan" their garden have let the wildflowers grow in the space they have dedicated to Mary.

MY GARDEN HAS PROVIDED ME WITH MANY PEACEFUL breaks from writing to work the soil, feeling the coolness of God's earth that reminds me God has blessed me with so much, given me many tools to work with to contribute to the kingdom on earth.

At times gray days and disappointments dampen my spirit, but the flowers in the Marian garden remind me of God's eternal love and the example he gave us in his mother. They also bring to mind some of the people who showed me love and set an example for me when I was a child.

I'm not sure my grandparents knew the tulips they planted around Mary represented spiritual openness, but I have no doubt that they prayed in that serene space. I pray for the neighbors and strangers who walk by and comment how pretty the roses are that grow next to Mary. And as I prune and cut those roses, a peace fills me as I tend to some of God's creation while remembering the mother God gave us all.



By BETH DOTSON BROWN, a freelance writer in Lancaster, Kentucky.