

Dogwood tree blooms in front of the Monastery church

Oasis of Peace, the Monastery Gardens

by Patricia Cunniff

The *Washingtonian Magazine* described the Franciscan Monastery and its gardens as an “Oasis of Peace” in bustling Washington, DC. Open daily from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., thousands visit each year.

The Franciscan friars started to plant their Gardens shortly after the 1899 dedication of the Monastery Church. Friars began to shape the land while the Monastery and Church were

Blue hardy geranium



The Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land was voted by The Washington Post as one of the 14 most peaceful places in Washington DC. Its amazing colorful gardens certainly contribute to making this beautiful place an “Oasis of Peace” where people come to walk, read and pray in the city.

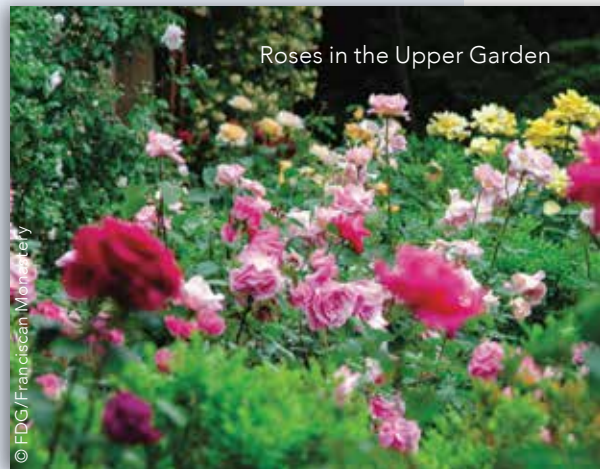
being built, planning for the outdoor replicas of Gethsemane, Ascension, and other shrines. Trees and flowers—especially those that evoke the Holy Land—were selected for a beautiful environment in keeping with St. Francis’ love of nature, recognizing that God is revealed to us through his many creatures.

Friar Meinrad Wiget (1881-1967) deserves credit for much of this garden development, working seven hours a day for over 60 years to care for the Monastery grounds. He directed people and animals to change the topography of the Monastery land, creating a hillside garden that replicated Gethsemane and Lourdes; photos of this work are on file at the US Library of Congress. In 1913, mounds of soil were again moved to place the Lourdes Grotto in a concrete cave-like structure resembling the mountains of Southern France.

The color and beauty of the Monastery’s gardens change throughout the year. By **Christmas**, winter camellias are in bloom, the cones of the magnolia trees are bright red, and holly trees produce red berries aplenty, all contributing to Christmas decorations for the Monastery altars.

ROSE GARDENS

Among the flowers in the Monastery gardens, the Rosary Portico embraces eleven formal rose beds—around 500 roses—in the Upper Garden. Another 400 or so bloom in less formal settings. The roses bloom in mid-May and again in August or September. If the Washington weather remains mild, some roses will still be blooming in November.



Roses in the Upper Garden

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Daffodils in the Upper Garden



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VISIT THE GARDENS

Thousands visit the gardens annually, for a casual walk alone or with others, for prayer or simply to enjoy the beauty of God's creation. Hundreds (500-600 each year) participate in one of the garden tours. Volunteer docents give drop-in garden tours each Saturday, April through September, 11 a.m. and 12 noon. Groups may also schedule tours for other times. The garden tour guides hope that they are building on Brother Meinrad's vision when he said: "In my little way, with the nurturing of these flowers, I hope to lead as many souls as I can to God."



Azaleas blooming in April

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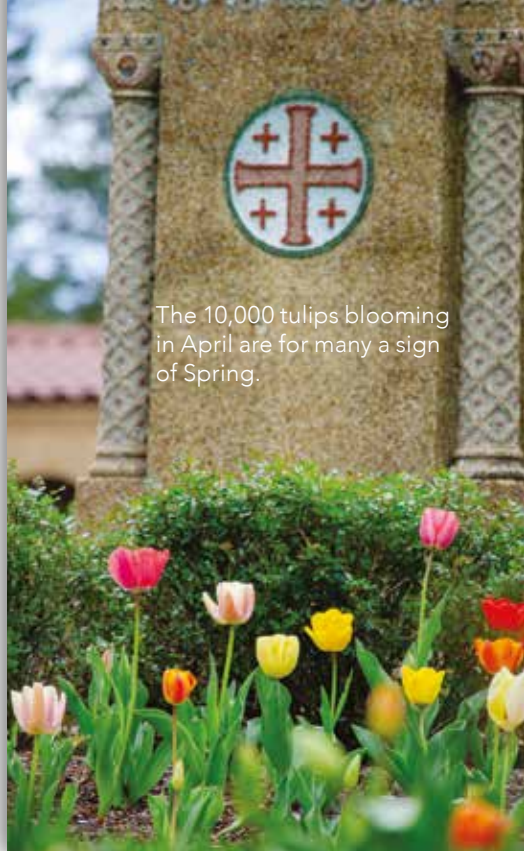
Hellebores, the Lenten Rose, are in bloom in late **January-February**. Many hellebores are in the Lower Gardens around the shrines and Stations of the Cross. The bright red camellias surrounding the Stations of the Cross are in full bloom on Good Friday as more than 400 make the Way of the Cross through the gardens.

The daffodils, tulips, and spring-flowering trees mark the

birth of spring. The Monastery's Oriental garden is at its peak when white flowers appear on the bark of the white redbud trees and the dogwoods are in bloom, a beautiful setting for visitors to meditate and reflect.

The hillside near Lourdes blooms with azaleas in April, joined by rhododendron, lush with lavender and cerise flowers.

In **May**, workers replace tulip bulbs with annuals to provide an



The 10,000 tulips blooming in April are for many a sign of Spring.

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array of color with several perennials throughout summer and fall. Blue, lavender, and white phlox surround the St. Francis' statue, along with yellow and gold lilies. Pink and blue hydrangeas bloom near the Fishpond, joined by beautiful pink astilbes in June. **Summer** brings an abundance of the blue hardy geranium and yellow coreopsis. In **August-September**, bright yellow *ligularia dentata* bloom near the Ascension Shrine. Later in the fall, the pink turtle head pops up and mums replace the spring-summer annuals.

From summer to fall, the crape myrtle trees burst with white, lavender, pink, or cherry flowers. Tropical and sub-tropical plants—palms, angel trumpet plants, and banana trees—are placed in the gardens in spring, in keeping with the natural Holy Land setting, and are removed in the fall to winter in the Monastery Greenhouse. ■