

Live *Laudato Si'* by Creating a Mary Garden Featuring Native Plants

"There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions." (*Laudato Si* #211)

Interested in creating a Mary Garden in the spirit of *Laudato Si'*? Here you can learn more about why it is important to use native plants to create a Mary Garden at your home, school or parish.

What is a Mary Garden?

Mary Gardens allow us to express our love of Jesus' Mother and acclaim her as Queen of All Creation. As part of our devotion to her, we can make a difference for God's creation by contributing to the health of the earth through the use of plants native to our area. Best of all, your new garden will be a spiritual habitat that praises God and fosters a greater connection with God, people, and nature. You will be living *Laudato Si'*!

How Did Mary Gardens Originate?

Since the Middle Ages, missionaries and the faithful have planted gardens dedicated to Our Blessed Mother. These include common flowers re-named after her attributes, like her clothing, person, or spiritual life. Many plants have legends and symbols associated with them that represent Mary, or some aspect of scripture. These gardens offer a dedicated place to pray and reflect about the life of the Mother of Our Lord.

Why Use Native Plants?

Because Mary Gardens originated in Europe, the plants that are traditionally used are native to that region, and not to the United States. Using plants that are native to your local area in a Mary Garden can be both spiritually fulfilling and ecologically beneficial for our Earth and the creatures who dwell in it. One major threat to the planet is the decline in biodiversity—short for biological diversity. Biodiversity is the variety of all living things and their interactions. We, as humans, depend on healthy ecosystems for our survival. This includes what is called "ecosystem services" -- clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and ecosystems that can adapt to a changing climate. We know that the more biodiverse an ecosystem is, the better able it is to provide these ecosystem services. Native plants play a critical role in maintaining the ecosystem services that all God's creatures depend on for life.

What Does Pope Francis Say About Biodiversity?

In his 2016 Message for World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, the Holy Father said, *"We must not be indifferent or resigned to the loss of biodiversity and the destruction of ecosystems, often caused by our irresponsible and selfish behavior. 'Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence ... We have no such right.'" Quoting Laudato Si' #33.*

The great news is that each of us can and must help!

Who Can Create a Mary Garden?

A garden can be a personal or family project, or a community or parish project. Anyone can do this::

- Individuals and families, young and old
- Creation Care teams
- Scout troops including Eagle and Gold Projects
- Women's groups
- Knights of Columbus
- School or Religious Ed programs
- Youth and Young Adults groups

Where Can I Create a Mary Garden?

Anywhere, that your time, talents, and space permit:

- Our balconies and patios (container gardens)
- Our yards
- Our parish campuses
- Our school grounds

What Are the Steps in Creating a Mary Garden?

Start your Mary Garden with these seven easy steps:

1. **Choose the appropriate place for the garden.** Locate it in a quiet place where people may pray or reflect. If you don't have a yard or property, a container garden can work as well.
2. **Prepare the site.** Clear the area of turf grass, weeds, and any invasive or undesirable plants. If you are planting among existing trees, shrubs or perennials, aim for your garden to be at least 70% native plants.
3. **Find a statue of the Blessed Mother.** If you have a large Mary statue, that's great. If not, that is ok also. You can even make a miniature garden with a statue from your nativity set!
4. **Choose native plants for your Mary Garden.** There are four main things to consider when choosing your native plants that symbolize Mary: (1) how sunny or shady, wet or dry, is the soil? (2) how tall will the plants become fully grown? (3) when will the plants bloom? And (4) how much maintenance will be required?
5. **Plan placement of plants.** Decide on arrangement of the plants, considering their size when fully grown and putting taller ones in the back.
6. **Purchase and plant.** Now that you know what you will buy, what they mean to you, and where you should place them, you can begin to buy and plant. This is the easy and fun part. (See below for where to purchase your native plants.)
7. **Add meaningful and prayerful accents.** Be creative! Add stepping stones or painted rocks, or a bench for quiet prayer and reflection.

What Plants are Suitable for a Mary Garden?

The Saint Kateri Conservation Center has begun a project to identify native alternatives to traditional Mary Garden plants. These are listed here: [Mary Gardens - Saint Kateri Conservation Center](#) These native plants were chosen because they look similar to the European versions or because they are botanically related. The National Wildlife Federation can also help you choose the best plants to support biodiversity (keystone plants) by zipcode: [Home - Native Plants Finder \(nwf.org\)](#)

Where Can I Purchase Native Plants?

Staff at Earth Sangha Wild Plant Nursery can provide guidance on the best native plants for your project: [Wild Plant Nursery | earthsangha](#). Plant Nova Natives is another comprehensive resource about local native plants, how to choose and where to get them including native nurseries and native plant sales. See: [Native-only | Virginia, USA | Plant NOVA Natives](#). In addition, many nurseries and garden centers in Northern Virginia include NOVA Natives in their inventories and have allowed volunteers to label native species with red stickers.

What Is the Difference Between a Mary Garden, a Pollinator Garden and a Kateri Habitat?

To enhance biodiversity, a landscape of at least 70% native plants is desirable. A native pollinator garden focuses specifically on flowering plants which support pollinators such as bees and butterflies throughout the growing season. A native Mary Garden can be a pollinator garden or any native garden with a focus on plants with Marian meanings and a religious expression such as a Mary statue. If your Mary Garden or other native plant garden provides certain habitat elements such as food, water, cover and space for people and wildlife; uses sustainable practices such as reduced water, fertilizer and chemical use; and incorporates a religious expression such as a Saint statue or St Kateri Habitat sign, it can also qualify and be certified as a Saint Kateri Habitat. Saint Kateri Habitats are a more comprehensive way to restore the health of our gardens or properties. More information about the Saint Kateri Habitats program can be found here. [Saint Kateri Habitats and Parks - Saint Kateri Conservation Center](#)

Where Can I Find More About the Importance of Native Plants and Their Impact on Biodiversity?

The Homegrown National Park website includes a wealth of helpful educational videos for new and experienced gardeners alike: [HOMEGROWN NATIONAL PARK](#). It's a great resource if you need more information about why the biodiversity concept is important to share with your family, team members, and pastor.

Where Can I Find More About Obtaining a Grant for My School's Mary Garden?

The Catholic Climate Covenant is offering small grants to Catholic groups for creation care activities. The 2022 Victory Noll Sisters Small Grants Program will offer \$75,000 in small grants that will a) support projects, programs and events across U.S. Catholic communities that advance the spirit of *Laudato Si'* and b) promote diocesan and parish

creation care activity as part of the synodal process. Small grants for 2022 will be available up to a maximum of \$1,000 for U.S. Catholic parishes, schools, dioceses, and other U.S. Catholic organizations that apply. The application deadline to apply is May 2nd, 2022. See: [Victory Noll Sisters Small Grants Program 2022 | We're all part of God's plan\(et\) \(godsplanet.us\)](#) for more information on how to apply for a grant.

Earth Sangha ([Plant Grant | earthsangha](#)) offers a matching grant program where you may be eligible to receive a donated native plant for every plant purchased from their Wild Plant Nursery. The Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District ([Conservation Assistance Programs | Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District \(fairfaxcounty.gov\)](#)) also offers financial assistance programs for both individuals and places of worship.

Are There Examples of Mary Gardens Located at Homes, Schools, and Parishes?

The St. Kateri Conservation Center has an online library and map of 185 Catholic habitats for people and wildlife! This is a Catholic conservation community focused on God, faith, and caring for his creation. They encourage religious expression in the stewardship of creation and address the fundamental religious and moral dimensions of ecology and the environment. Located here are stories and photos from our growing Saint Kateri Habitat community, including several locations within the Diocese of Arlington. See: [Saint Kateri Habitat Tour - Saint Kateri Conservation Center](#).

Have more questions? Contact us at careforcreation@arlingtondiocese.org.