

The Convent Garden

”Every heart should be a small garden... full of wonderful beautiful plants and flowers.”

St. Alexandra

When I work in the garden I always wonder how easy the grass and the weeds grow and how difficult it is to keep the flowers fresh and beautiful. It's like when you strive to keep your heart pure and full of love for everyone but sometimes it's so hard...

We have many roses of different colours in the convent's garden. They all blossom in May and the beds, where they grow, look like a sea of roses and their scent is absolutely wonderful. It's a lovely sight to behold after the long and cold winter. But the blossom of the roses lasts only for about a month, so we have to grow other flowers so that we have blossoming plants throughout the summer.



We hope the garden helps people who come here to pray find peace and tranquillity far away from the noise and the rush of the city. They need the rest a beautiful garden can give them and hopefully, it reminds them of Heaven's garden where God dwells and gives peace to everything. Some Holy Fathers say that in Heaven's garden the trees have blossom and fruit on their branches at the same time. They say that bright birds sing there and the air is full of a wonderful aroma. We would like our garden to be just a tiny bit like that... We know that here on earth it's impossible to be so perfect. But we work hard and hope God will help us bring joy and peace to people who come to our convent.

There are many primroses in the front of the garden. They are purple, yellow and white and they flower in March. They are bushes of different sizes and between every two bushes there are hyacinths and snowdrops. When they stop flowering it is the turn of the violets and tulips to grow. All these flowers remind me of a special prayer to the Mother of God which we sing during Lent when we decorate the icon with these flowers:

*“Rejoice, unfading Flower. Rejoice, well-shaded Tree
under which many find shelter”.*

The fragrance of the hyacinths is so strong that every time I hear the songs of that prayer I can smell the hyacinths all around...

We grow many box-trees. The box-tree is considered a convent plant here in Bulgaria because it is green all year round and thus reminds us of the everlasting life of our souls. There are five big box-trees in our garden and many small ones and they are all very beautiful especially in winter when there is snow everywhere and they are the only green colour in the garden.

There are two kinds of cypresses in our yard. The first kind looks like a candle and many trees of that kind are planted on both sides of the entrance alley of the convent. They look like many candles lit in prayer bringing that prayer to God with their green flames. The second kind of cypress looks more like a pine. We have planted those trees around the church and to each one we have given the name of one of the twelve apostles. The first two trees we planted we dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul, of course.

There are many fruit trees in our yard – apples, plums, peaches. We had one particularly big plum-tree in front of the old church eight years ago which we called the ‘Queen of the Plums’ (the Queen-Plum) in jest. We used to sit under its shadow reading and discussing spiritual books and it seemed to me that the tree would listen to us and participate in our conversation by waving its branches.

Friends of ours brought us a Japanese Sour Cherry which flowers in April with many small pink flowers covering its branches. The tree is dedicated to a little girl, Sofia Elen. She was baptised in our church and her parents wanted to give us the cherry tree as a present.

Later in the summer the hydrangeas and gladioli bloom. They flower at the same time but they are so different – the hydrangea is like a bush and we have to water it every day to keep it fresh and the gladioli has just one branch. It likes the sun and needs to be protected from the strong wind. When I looked at these two flowers last summer I remembered how a friend of mine used to say that people are like flowers – some of them are regal, some are plain and some could even be poisonous. Later I found a similar quote in the Psalter: *“As for man...as a flower of the field, so shall he flourish”*.

The last flower to bloom in our garden is the marigold. It grows all summer and in September when all the other flowers have gone it reminds us of the warmth of the sun with its yellow and orange flowers. It’s like a beautiful evening hymn to Christ: *‘O Gladsome Light of the holy glory of the Immortal*

Father, the Holy, Blessed Christ. Having come to the setting of the sun and beheld the light of evening, we praise God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit....O Son of God Giver of life, therefore the world doth glorify Thee’.

We would like to have many flowers not only in our garden but in the church of the convent, too. It's not the custom to keep pots in the church so we have many vases for fresh flowers there. On special feast days like the Day of St. Peter and Paul and Easter we make wreaths of flowers for the icons. The woman who makes the wreaths is called Radina. When she was a little girl she went on a pilgrimage with a group of old women. They sang her a sad song about Jesus Christ that told of how when He was a little boy He had a garden with beautiful flowers. But bad children stole the flowers and laughed at Him. When Radina heard that song she decided to always bring Jesus flowers. She's nearly seventy years old now but she comes very often to our convent with a lot of flowers and decorates the icons. We are grateful to God for having such a wonderful and faithful friend like her!



The Holy Fathers say that virtues are like flowers and sins are like weeds in the garden of one's soul. Just like in a real garden it's always much harder to grow a flower than a weed; the same way it's harder to acquire virtues like wisdom, love and patience in one's soul. And the most beautiful flower of the soul's garden is a pure heart. So we often say the verse from Psalm 50: "Create in me a pure heart, Lord!" and hope that God will give us that most precious virtue!