Monastery Cutting Garden: Cultivating Beauty, Hospitality and Gratitude

Kate Meyer, Volunteer Floral Arranger

From May to October, sisters and guests enjoy fresh floral arrangements in the Monastic Dining Room and at the Gathering Place reception desk. Sister Elizabeth Theis not only manages the cutting garden that produces these flowers, but also works with the receptionists. These overlapping ministries give her a unique perspective on the daily practice of hospitality at the front desk.

S. Elizabeth notes that receptionists comment regularly on how floral arrangements draw passers-by into conversation. People often ask whether the flowers are “real.” Both gardeners and non-gardeners notice unusually bright colors and the large blooms of certain specimens. Photographers capture arrangements that catch their fancy. And working in the company of fresh flowers is uplifting to the receptionists themselves.

A cutting garden that produces throughout the season is the result of good oversight and lots of manual labor. S. Elizabeth keeps a garden plot plan and tracks perennials that stay put over winter, bulbs to be taken up in the fall and replanted in spring, and open beds for planting annuals each year. She participates in the work of creating “good soil,” including composting, tilling and weeding, and fall clean-up and mulching. Once the garden starts producing, the cutting and arranging of flowers happens most Friday mornings. “All this is doable,” she is quick to point out, “because of dedicated volunteer garden partners and floral arrangers.” During the 2015 season, volunteers contributed about 365 hours.

As with vegetable gardens, a crescendo happens in August when the quantity and variety of flowers reaches a peak moment. Bouquets might include zinnias, sunflowers, bells of Ireland, mums, calla lilies, baby’s breath, celosia, snap dragons and the much anticipated gladioli. Once the dining room and reception desk arrangements are accounted for, the bounty goes into “extra bouquets” for monastery offices, individual sisters, the Chapel and special events, including jubilees and professions. S. Elizabeth credits these moments with “keeping her going” and motivated to begin anew each garden year. Mainly, she is grateful for “good health, faithful helpers, and the Creator working through me for the greater glory of God.”

Above left: S. Elizabeth, left, at work in the cutting garden with Kate Meyer

Below left: Kate Meyer arranging flowers