

# THE MARY GARDEN

In medieval times, a garden could have a symbolic and spiritual dimension. The *hortus conclusus* or 'enclosed garden' was a sacred area which might represent the Christian soul, enclosed in the body, or the Church, formed of the body of the faithful. It was also, in the late Middle Ages, an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, identified with the bride in the Song of Songs in the Old Testament. In the 15th century, depictions of the Virgin in a Paradise Garden were frequent, in particular in Flemish and German painting. In these images, the flowers all have a symbolic meaning, representing Mary's virtues.

- Christmas Rose – said to have flowered on Christmas Day to honour the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, son of Mary
- Cowslip – 'Our Lady's Keys'. In medieval times, St Mary was often referred to as 'Our Lady'
- Daisy – symbolic of purity and simplicity, it is widely portrayed in the 'flowery mead' or meadow in medieval paintings
- Forget-Me-Not – 'Our Lady's Eyes'
- Foxglove – 'Our Lady's Gloves'
- Heartsease – known as 'Herb Trinity' because of its white, yellow and purple colouring. Common in medieval paintings of Mary
- Iris – compared to the Virgin in mystic devotion. The blade-shaped foliage denotes the sorrows which 'pierced her heart' in accordance with Simeon's prophecy at the Presentation of Christ in the Temple
- Lady's Mantle – 'Our Lady's Mantle'. The leaves are covered with fine silky hairs on which raindrops can settle without wetting the leaf. Possibly because of this it was likened to a cloak for the Blessed Virgin
- Lily – regularly appeared in paintings of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel greeted Mary with the joyful news that she was to be the mother of Jesus, the Saviour of the World. The Venerable Bede, the great 8th-century chronicler of the English Church and people, claimed that the whiteness of the petals represented her physical purity, and the golden anthers the radiant light of her soul
- Lily of the Valley – 'Our Lady's Tears'. It was said to have grown where she wept, and was one of the flowers used to decorate the Lady Chapels of churches. It is shown growing in the grass beneath Mary's feet in paintings by Jan Van Eyck
- Lungwort – 'Mary's Tears'. The white spots on the leaves are her tear stains, and the changing colour of the flowers from pink to blue represent her blue eyes reddened with weeping. Lungwort is also known as 'Mary and Joseph'
- Marigold – 'Mary's Gold'. The flowers were used as a gold-coloured dye for wool, and may have been thought to symbolise Our Lady's simplicity and domesticity
- Peony – gloriously rich medieval flower which featured in many paintings and tapestries
- Periwinkle – 'The Virgin's Flower', probably because of its blue, star-like flowers. Mary was often referred to as *Stella Maris*, 'Star of the Sea'
- Pinks – also known as the 'Gilly Flower', they are considered a symbol of the Virgin Mary
- Primrose – was used to decorate church altars in May, 'the month of Mary'
- Rose – symbolises the Virgin herself, who was sometimes known as the 'Mystic Rose'. Here we are growing two antique roses: *Rosa Gallica* (the 'apothecary's rose') and *Rosa Alba*, both supplied by [Peter Beales Roses](#) of Norfolk, a Gold Medal winner at the 2003 Chelsea Flower Show. The *Gallica* is thought to be the oldest cultivated rose, the ancestor of all European medieval roses
- Rosemary – the pale blue flowers are said to have taken their colour from Mary's veil when she spread it over a rosemary bush
- Snowdrop – 'Our Lady's Bells'. Snowdrops flower at Candlemas (The Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, also known as The Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin), which falls on February 2nd
- Star of Bethlehem – a reminder of Jesus' birth at Christmas
- Violet – 'Our Lady's Modesty'. The violet's delicacy, colour, sweet scent and heart-shaped leaves refer to Mary's constancy, modesty and innocence
- Wild Strawberry – designated as the fruit of the Virgin Mary and of blessed souls in heaven. They are depicted growing in the grass beneath Mary's feet in paintings by Jan Van Eyck