

GARDENS

HE LI Life

With a Little Help From Our Saints

THERE ARE SO MANY magic moments in our gardens. Moments that we take for granted. Seeds are miraculous, and so is compost. The way plants grow and survive despite wind and drought and frost is remarkable. Just consider the simple symmetry of a maple leaf or the complex beauty of a passion flower. Or the fact that a hyacinth bulb contains its

own embryo and the food to feed it.

You have to wonder whether somebody's looking after us gardeners. Maybe somebody is. Miracles happen all the time in our gardens, so you shouldn't be surprised to learn that we have a patron saint.

I didn't know this until recently, although if you'd have asked me, I might have said it was St. Francis of Assisi. He was known for his love of animals and is considered the patron saint of nature. That's why statues of St. Francis include a small bird on his shoulder.

But St. Francis isn't the patron saint of gardeners. That honor goes to an Irish monk named St. Fiacre (pronounced fee-ah-kruh). When it came to the caring of the green, he was an expert. From a distance, statues of St. Fiacre look a little like those of St. Francis. But there are no birds on him, unless of course they're real. St. Fiacre usually has one hand on a shovel and the other on a Bible, a sheaf of flowers or a bunch of onions.

This is the month to toast St. Fiacre — his feast day is Aug. 30. We don't make much of a fuss about him in the United States, but in Europe there are hymns and floats and floral displays in his honor.

As well there should be. As is the case with a lot of gardeners I know, St. Fiacre was an interesting character whose life was tied to the land. He was born in Ireland late in the Sixth Century and could have followed in the footsteps of his father, a tribal chieftain. Instead, he disdained power for peace. He entered a monastery, where he became immersed in an ideal combination — gardening and the classics.

Apparently inspired by a yen for solitude and a place to sow, Fiacre traveled to France, where the bishop of Meaux gave him land for a hermitage. He built a hut and planted vegetables and herbs and flowers. Eventually, he asked the bishop for more land so he could feed the sick and hungry.

As the legend goes, the bishop said Fiacre could have as much land as he could dig up in a single day. The monk prayed for guidance, and the next morning all he had to do was drag his spade across the earth. Trees toppled, bushes were uprooted, trenches appeared and stones fell away. The horticultural monk established a monastery where he grew crops that fed the poor and helped the sick.

There other things about St. Fiacre, who died in 670, that you should know. It saddens me to report that he was said to

be a confirmed misogynist. And he is considered the patron saint of Parisian cabbies, because the hackney carriages for hire in the 17th Century plied their trade from the Hotel Saint-Fiacre. They were consequently called fiacres.

While I was digging into garden saints, I came up with a few more names that seem worth mentioning. Consider St. Phocas of Sinope. The buzz on Phocas is that he gardened on the shores of the Black Sea in the Fourth Century and gave his surplus to the poor. He was condemned as a Christian, and soldiers were sent to kill him. Phocas realized the soldiers had no idea what he looked like, so he told them he knew the man they wanted and offered to help them search the following day.

While the soldiers slept, Phocas dug his own grave in the garden. The next morning, he revealed all and said that martyrdom would be an honor. They killed him and buried him in his grave. Even in death, Phocas enriched his beloved garden — which sure seems saintly to me.

Other garden patrons include St. Rose of Lima, the first saint of the Americas, who lived in a hut in her garden in Peru around the turn of the 17th Century. She showed her piety through extreme penance. And St. Dorothy, who was executed as a Christian by the Romans in the Fourth Century. On her way to her death, the young gardener was jeered by a lawyer for her refusal to marry or to worship idols. He asked her to send him fruits from paradise. After the execution, a child appeared with three roses and three apples. The attorney was convinced. He became a Christian and was martyred himself.

For the less reverential, there are the pagan deities associated with the garden — such as the Greek god Pan, who is said to inspire fertility and sometimes shows up as fountain statuary spouting water into pools. Also the "green man," a primal and mysterious character who goes back at least 2,000 years and is usually depicted as a face partly obscured by leaves or with fruits and vines coming out of his mouth. He is said to represent humankind's harmony with nature.

To each his own. I'm not about to tell you who or what to believe in. All I know is that when it comes to gardening, a little help could be divine. •

A version of this column appears in "Gardening on Long Island With Irene Virag." The 200-page book by Newsday's garden editor is available for \$19.95, plus shipping, handling and tax. For more information, call 800-400-4112.



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The patron saint of gardeners, St. Fiacre, had ties to the land. He sometimes is depicted holding a shovel with one hand and flowers or onions with the other.