



# GROWING NEWS

## About Our Garden Ministry

Even as the growing season waned, the Garden Ministry was kept very busy finishing off the necessary tasks to “put the garden to bed”. We had a very busy November, with most of the many tasks required to clean up the garden and put away equipment that won't be used again until the spring being completed at a “Come Join Us in the Garden” half-day on November 9th. Just after that, a very successful raffle of our garden's products was held, where over \$400 was raised to help support the work of the Garden Ministry. Lavender and Rose Petal sachets were sold, and Red Currant baked goods raffled to eager parishioners. We are very grateful for their enthusiastic support of our efforts.

While one might think the Garden Ministry becomes inactive over the winter, nothing could be further from the truth. There is always re-visioning to be done, and planning for the upcoming growing season, which really begins long before the weather outside is conducive to gardening activity. Crops have to be selected and seeding organized. Ongoing projects need to be evaluated and adjusted, and new ones considered. We are always on the lookout for incentives to encourage more participation in our Garden Ministry. We are developing new administrative models to facilitate more manageable leadership roles, because the old adage “many hands make light work” is never more true than when considering our wonderful but expansive garden.



Ivy Lau receives red currant pie from Elizabeth Quilliam

“Growing News” is the newsletter of the St. Gabriel's Garden Ministry, published quarterly, at the turn of each season.

**Garden Ministry Coordinator**  
Kevin Benoit

**Editor**  
Marlene Bourdon-King

**Design**  
Nikki Malunas

**Photo Credits**  
Shoreh Sabsevari  
Bridget Barron



## Spotlight on “The Three Sisters”

Last summer, the Garden Ministry experimented with a “modern adaptation” of an ancient agricultural technique developed by indigenous people, and certainly practised by the Six Nations Confederacy, some of whom lived in southern Ontario. There is archeological evidence of corn having been grown over 300 years ago around Crawford Lake, near Milton, Ontario, west of Toronto.

First Nations people learned that using the natural tendencies of three different plants could create a cooperative growing system that enhanced the production of each. The way “The Three Sisters” worked together also eased the work of the women tending the crops. They created mounds of earth about 3 feet high, and 6 feet across, with enough space for walkways between adjacent mounds.

At the top of each mound, corn was planted—enough for a few stalks. The corn sprouts first, and concerns itself with growing tall and stiff. Its roots grow wide and shallow, and soak up the rain first. Slower to germinate are the climbing beans, planted around what would become the base of the corn stalks. Once they have developed their deep tap roots, nodules form that will house the nitrogen-fixing rhizobium bacteria. Then, the beans also grow upwards, but in a spiral, looking for support. This, the corn stalks provide. Beans are legumes, and the bacteria in their root nodules enrich the soil with nitrogen, which is as important to growing plants as oxygen is to humans. The seeds of the final circle are the slowest to burst out of their casings. Pumpkin and squash seeds were inserted around the top of the mound below the beans. These produce vines growing outward along the ground, covering the mound with their broad leaves, and capable of sending down roots wherever the vine touches the soil. This enhances their water-sourcing capacity, as well as fixes them to the ground to withstand wind. The mounds gave the squash plants the necessary depth and breadth for their roots, as well as the space they needed to spread over the surface. The vines shaded the ground and thus prevented it

from drying out too quickly in the sun, preserving the moisture in the soil, which was advantageous for all the plants growing on the mound. The mutually advantageous relationship supported each plant’s growth, but it also relieved the women, who tended the plants, from having to transport heavy loads of water to keep the plants hydrated if rain was insufficient.



Consequently, this planting system provided a symbiotic relationship not only between the “Three Sisters”, who were dependent on human intervention to provide the environment they needed, but also for their human caretakers, who relied on the plants’ productivity to feed the people. However, these crops were not intended primarily for “fresh vegetables” during the summer. Rather, they were nurtured to maturity, ultimately providing dried corn to be ground for meal; the beans within their dried pods became a reliable a protein source; and the long-lasting pumpkins and winter squash provided sweetness and thickened their stews. All were used to feed the people during the winter.

In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer, the author shares the wisdom of the “Three Sisters” (though really, she points out, there’s a fourth sister—the women planters and nurturers).



The way of the Three Sisters reminds me of one of the basic teachings of our people. The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world.

Individuality is cherished and nurtured, because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others.

Being among the sisters provides a visible manifestation of what a community can become when its members understand and share their gifts. In reciprocity, we fill our spirits as well as our bellies.



From Ch. 13 of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Our experiment was conducted in the community garden boxes, and met with mixed success. This outcome occurred mostly because the box adaptation, while similar in principle, did not really provide the same ideal growing conditions of the indigenous technique. The soil was not mounded high enough. Though the types of beans planted were heirloom varieties and productive, not all were climbing varieties, and consequently, matured at different times. Some were harvested at their peak, some when they were slightly over-ripe, and some given sufficient time to mature so long-keeping beans within the pods could be reaped. But this made harvesting somewhat a “hit or miss” event, and thus, not entirely satisfactory. We also discovered that we were unable to harvest much of the squash, because others got to it before we could. Hopefully, the squash was taken to be given to, or eaten by, people in need, and not stolen for personal gain, or vandalized.

Next summer, we hope to better employ the original technique honed by the ancestors of our native neighbours. We want to move the “Three Sisters” propagation to parts of the garden where we can create proper mounds, unrestricted by box walls, with insufficient depth of soil for healthy root development.

Perhaps then we will experience the successful harvests once enjoyed by the native peoples who made this land their home. Perhaps, too, we can find it in ourselves to share our gifts with our garden, and reap both the tangible and spiritual rewards.

## Winter in All of Our Lives

From *Winter Prayers*  
[jesuitresource.org](http://jesuitresource.org), Xavier University

There is a winter in all of our lives,  
a chill and darkness that makes us yearn  
for days that have gone  
or put our hope in days yet to be.  
Father God, you created seasons for a purpose.  
Spring is full of expectation—  
buds breaking  
frosts abating and an awakening of creation  
before the first days of summer.  
Summer sun gives warmth  
and comfort to our lives,  
reviving aching joints.  
Summer brings colour, new life  
and crops to fruiting.  
Autumn gives nature space  
to lean back, relax and  
enjoy the fruits of its labour.  
Mellow colours paint the sky and landscape  
as the earth prepares to rest.  
Then winter, cold and bare  
as nature takes stock—  
rests, unwinds, sleeps until the time is right.  
An endless cycle,  
and yet a perfect model.  
We need a winter in our lives:  
a time of rest, a time to stand still,  
a time to reacquaint ourselves  
with the faith in which we live.  
It is only then that we can draw strength  
from the one in whom we are rooted,  
take time to grow and rise through the  
darkness  
into the warm glow of your springtime:  
to blossom, flourish,  
and bring colour and vitality into this world,  
your garden.  
Thank you, Father ,  
for the seasons of our lives.

- *Author Unknown*



# “In the Bleak Midwinter...” A Time for Reflection

by Marlene Bourdon-King, Editor



The garden is asleep. The days have become the shortest they can be at this latitude. The title of this piece quotes Christina Rossetti’s carol. Depending on the weather, (which as I write, is dumping snow on Ontario,) lyrics from that carol, “snow lies on snow...”, are particularly apt. But it isn’t always so. And perhaps, by the time this is published, it may be raining and the snow gone. A white Christmas in Toronto is never a sure thing. The fact of climate change makes any assurances even less likely.

Regardless of whether the ground is white, winter is a time of rest, of quiet, of contemplation. What can we do differently? What will help to stave off despondency that threatens when we take a long, hard look at the troubles of this world?

The answer is easy: it is action. Yet can we engage in the actions we must undertake to make the difference we wish to see in our world?

Because of Jesus, we are a people of hope. Because we have hope, we must also find the courage within ourselves to sidestep avoidance.

Jesus was not a bystander. He did not simply direct and instruct. He was a man of action, and a man of service, and how much better off would our world be if we followed him more closely!

As a species, humans are unfortunately adept at sidestepping, and avoiding consequences for as long as possible. But if we don’t do the small things because they are inconvenient, how can we expect the big things to happen?

So, in this season of relative quiet, at least in the natural world, perhaps we can set some small goals that will reap long-term results. While the garden sleeps, and active gardening goes into the planning stage, what can we, as part of the community of this very special parish, plan to do to help in the great work of maintaining our outdoor Sacred Space?

Can we integrate our spiritual practice with prayerful work in the garden? Time in the garden is time away from hustle and bustle. One cannot really hurry when working in the garden. It is slow, methodical work that puts us more in tune with “God’s time”. While we work with things that grow, we are reminded of the wonder of God’s creation—the myriad varieties of pattern and colour, the symbiotic relationships, the connectedness of all of creation, including us humans.

In planning now, when spring and summer schedules have not yet been put into place, can we build in “prayerful work” in St. Gabriel’s Garden? Can we commit, perhaps as a family, to taking care of one of the community garden boxes? Can we decide we are going to join the “Saturday in the Garden” teams undertaking ongoing maintenance tasks throughout the growing season? Would we like to take responsibility for a particular part of the garden—an identifiable piece of the whole that we will care for? Is there a certain gardening task that we really like to do? Perhaps it is planting, or harvesting. Perhaps we enjoy “deadheading” flowers (which means removing spent blooms) to encourage more blossoming? Maybe we get a great deal of satisfaction out of weeding, or pruning?

Yet how would actions such as these help the troubles of our world, you may justifiably ask? I suppose that depends on your perspective. If you see working with the Garden Ministry as a “duty”, rather than as a prayer, your energies might not have the “ripple effect” that could be the outcome. It is very hard—and for us, probably impossible—to see the impact of our “little actions”. But little actions undoubtedly have a cumulative effect. And although we might not know the outcome, God sees, and God does know.

Jesus told us about the power of prayer. Some of us may know of it from personal experience. It is our hope that you will include working in the St. Gabe’s Garden in your prayerful practice come the next growing season. We want to share the experience of joy that comes with fostering the garden’s growth and wellbeing. Who knows what the consequences of your actions might be?

