Care for Our Common Home:
The Urban Herbs Gardens at Georgetown

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A med student sprawls in my garden, limbs to the four winds, eyes closed, enjoying the touch of the grass, the hum of honeybees, and a lulling breeze. You need this garden, students. Med school is hard and can be isolating. Come visit the Urban Herbs gardens; the podium garden is just outside the library windows, between Dahlgren and Lombardi. Look for medicinal herbs: peppermint (*Piperita x mentha*) and spearmint (*Mentha spicata*) –are the easiest to find; St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), with yellow flowers that bloom near June 24th, the feast day of St. John the Baptist; chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*) and echinacea bloom in the summer; and in the fall, look for goji berry (*Lycium chinensis*), blackberry lily (*Belamcanda chinensis*), and colchicum, the autumn crocus (where we get colchicine!) Pick some mint for tea, or (bad day?) mojitos: take the tips (the top couple of inches) of the plants; they will simply branch and make more leaves.

Consider downloading iNaturalist's Seek app to learn more about the flora and fauna in our gardens. The Urban Herbs gardens are full of nectar and larval host plants (butterfly baby nurseries) that attract many pollinators, including monarchs, pipevine swallowtails, silver-spotted skippers, and seven species of native bees (honeybees are not native, but they are honored immigrants). Baby bunnies nibble the grass (to the delight of sick children, whose carers bring them from the hospital to lie on the grass or be wheeled around the perimeter.

In the summer, come admire the rose mallow hibiscus flowers (as big as a child's head), smell the leaves of the "True rose" geranium, whose heady leaves were used in rose perfumes, and maybe taste a blueberry, strawberry, or a pineapple tomatillo (*Physalis pruinosa*). In the fall, watch the goldfinches bounce on the *Echinacea* and *Rudbeckia* as they pull the seeds off. In the winter, pluck an aromatic bay leaf from our bay tree (*Laurus nobilis*) to use in soup, or just to keep in your pocket for a little aromatherapy break.

Our gardens are full of beautiful flowers – there's something in bloom at least eleven months of the year – but there are also many edibles nestled among the ornamentals, because the Urban Herbs way is to mix everything together. That's what nature does: different plants take and give different nutrients to the earth, and their interactions help all to thrive. Monocultures are as bad for the living soil as isolationism is bad for countries(and med students). Our gardens are vibrant communities of plants, arthropods, and microorganisms, with an occasional mammal or reptile; they demonstrate the strength and beauty of diversity.

We even have diverse climates on campus. On a sunny winter day, find the magic garden behind the Research Building, where the temperature can be 15 degrees higher than other parts of campus. Surrounded by asphalt and concrete, south-facing, and next to heat vents, the climate in this four-foot-wide heat zone is closer to North Carolina than Washington, DC. Here we grow Southern figs (not usually hardy in this area), and pomegranates, to the delight of our Middle East and North African students and staff.

Honeybees from the Hoya hives feed deliriously on the yellow and red flowers of the Mexican bird of paradise; they apparently love imported food…




Bumblebees roll ecstatically over the passionflowers, named for the Passion of Christ. The three stigmas are said to represent the three nails with which Christ was nailed to the cross, the five anthers the five wounds, the radial filaments the crown of thorns, the ten petals the ten apostles, and the round fruit the world Christ was sent to save.




In the winter, a student perches rather perilously on a curb with her laptop (pull in your legs, girl, there are cars!), luxuriating in the sunny Research Building garden because it's 50° here, though it's 35° elsewhere on campus. In the summer, a student runs by the garden, yelling excitedly into her phone, "I see a hummingbird — a hummingbird — I've never seen one in person!"

Our gardens are ecosystems that demonstrate many ecological concepts, including organic, pollinator-friendly gardening, edible landscaping, permaculture (focusing on perennials), and xeriscaping (water-thrifty gardening). To care for the soil is literally to care for the earth, our common home.

On a bad day, weed. On a good day, plant. "Would you rather nurture something or destroy something today?" I ask my garden volunteers (interested? Email me at ajf29@georgetown.edu!) The students quickly sort themselves. The destroyers rip weeds out of the ground, dig up clumps of invading grass with sharply serrated digging spades, and take down small trees with axes. The nurturers plant: scattering herb and flower seeds collected the previous fall (just throw them around and step on them…), dividing iris and daylily clumps, and distributing the emigres; planting communities of allium, daffodil and grape hyacinth (stack three bulbs, the largest deepest, in one hole – the roots will intertwine, the leaves weave their way upwards, and the flowers bloom, sequentially, in the spring).

The destroyers view their mounting pile of weeds and wood with satisfaction. The nurturers must be satisfied with delayed gratification. It takes time for seeds to grow or transplants to recover from the shock of relocation before they send out new roots. In the spring and summer, all will see the fruits (or flowers) of their labors. In summer, real fruit can be had. First strawberries, then blueberries. In July, sour cherries, in August, pineapple tomatillos (*Physalis pruinosa*), individually wrapped in a little husk. Fall is for figs, behind the research building (wait until they're ripe, and only two each please!), and passionfruit (wait til they're fully ripe, yellow and wrinkly, because unripe fruit are full of cyanogenic glycosides – yes, that's cyanide, for those who weren't paying attention in biochem. You can tolerate small amounts of cyanide, but why tempt fate?)

Gardens soothe. With a bit of sun, anyone can have a garden. Here is my secret. Plant abundantly and recklessly, water faithfully for two weeks, then leave the plants on their own and see what lives and what dies. Plant more of what lives. Don't plant more of what dies.

The plants are medicine in many ways. I am never out working in the garden that someone doesn't stop by and emote: "I love these gardens, I walk here when I'm having a bad day", or "What are those beautiful flowers?" or "We have this herb in my country!" or "I picked some mint to make tea and it cured my stomach ache."

Gardens, like all communities, are ever needful and ever giving. The Urban Herbs gardens are primarily designed to feed non-human creatures, but they also feed humans, both literally and metaphorically, and spiritually.



