As the weather turns warm with the coming of Spring, many people are beginning to make plans for the coming gardening season. Most avid gardeners will tell you that they feel closer to God while working in their gardens than they do anywhere else. Planting, weeding, pruning, weeding, mulching, weeding, harvesting, and weeding are all opportunities to re-connect to God’s on-going work of creation. Gardens are places to work the soil, but they can also be places to pray and seek a few moments of solitude.

From the earliest centuries of the Christian faith, people have seen in various plants echoes of religious and spiritual themes. Many of these are reflected in gardening folklore and even in the names of the flowers and herbs themselves: Mary’s Bedstraw, Ladder-to-heaven, Penitent’s Rose, or Crown of Thorns. Like living stained glass, these flower and herbs became symbols of faith. And cultivating them became a means of prayer and contemplation.

Today, many gardeners plant whole gardens dedicated to religious and biblical themes. Among Catholics, “Mary’s Gardens” are popular, and are filled with plants whose names and folklore mention the Virgin Mary. In Washington, DC, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception has a large Mary’s Garden, given to the Shrine by the National Council of Catholic Women.

If you’d like to start a Mary’s Garden at your church, or in your own yard, there are lots of resources available on the internet. The best place to look is at www.mgardens.org, where you’ll find list of plants, references for folklore, photos, design suggestions, and information on plants and their symbolism.