

CONVERSATION STARTERS: PLANTS THAT HONOR LOVED ONES

By Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener, January 2023

While we still have a couple more months of possible snow and ice, now is a good time to be thinking about and planning your spring gardens

Have you ever thought of putting in a memory garden or just a plant to remind you of a beloved family member? It can be a good conversation starter with people alive right now, evoking fun discussions with that loved person in life and warm memories later on. (“See that patch of zinnias? I planted them there because I know how much you love them, and when I see them blooming, I think of you!”)

Such honoring or memorializing seems to have begun during the mid- and late-nineteenth century, as some towns and cities found their cemeteries filling up, and they began to move cemeteries to the outskirts of town. According to Wikipedia, while the new cemeteries, like the old ones, soon enough had rows and rows of graves, elaborate statuary, and mausoleums, cemetery planners conceived of “cemeteries... as public spaces... for all citizens to enjoy refined outdoor recreation amidst art and sculpture. Elaborate gardens were planted and family outings to the cemetery became popular social activities.” Even today, some people walk, jog, or bicycle through these park-like cemeteries.

But Victorian era cemeteries aren’t the only places with special plantings that honor loved ones. You may find just the right spot in your own lawn or garden to tuck in some special plants. You may draw inspiration from places you’ve visited, pictures you’ve seen in magazines, books, or even those garden catalogs.

My husband and I have visited many wonderful gardens (and yes, also cemeteries like Père laChaise!) over the years as we gave in to his wanderlust. These places have also guided us in our choices of garden style: Not for us the severe, formal arrangements of the great houses of Europe, with not a twig or leaf out of place, every blade of grass carefully trimmed. No, we discovered early on in our travels that we much preferred what is known as the English cottage garden—a carefully planned but exuberant profusion of blooms. Also, whether trees, shrubs, or flowers, many of the plants in our garden are there as much because they remind us of a loved one as because they fulfill our master plan (which, by the way, seems to change every year) to complete the garden.

- My father loved rhododendrons, as do we, so we have several rhodies, some of which he got to see in bloom for several years, and which in another three months or so, will shout out their beauty in our yard with blossoms from deepest red to palest pink.
- My maternal grandmother gave me heirloom peonies (*Paeonia*), irises (*Iridis* various species), and wild buttercup flowers for our first house in Annapolis, and even more when we moved to Frederick in 1973. Every spring as they bloom, I remember my grandmother digging up those peonies and irises, advising me in her wonderful Appalachian drawl of the best ways to plant and nourish those flowers. Because we’ve lived in the same house since 1973, Grandma got to see a lot of her peonies bloom in my yard. I’ve now continued the tradition, potting up and passing rooted plants on to my sons and their families and to friends and neighbors.

- Husband Hal loves petunias (*Petunia* species), so every spring we plant lots of those, intermingled with annual vinca (actually, *Catharanthus roseus*, Madagascar periwinkle) in the sunny gardens.
- Our crêpe myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) was planted in honor of his mother. She had several, ranging from pale to dark pink, that her parents had planted some time after 1913, when they built their house (now known as the restaurant Vin 909) in the Eastport suburb of Annapolis.
- For many years we had a magnificent weeping cherry on the front corner of our yard. Our younger son's wife took annual pictures around Easter of their oldest daughter, from age two onward, and of their other children, under the blossom-loaded weeping cherry. Our cherry has since died, but she continues the tradition now that they have their own weeping cherry.

Chances are, you've already cozied up to some catalogs online or in reality, and are dreaming (drooling over?) plants for this coming spring. Do you have anything that could be a conversation started with loved ones? If not, where might you tuck in a few flowers, a shrub, a tree that could spark those memories, or maybe just coax a smile and a warm tug on your heart as that person flashes in your mind? And just imagine the joy you'd bring to that person when you show him/her that special something planted with him/her in mind.

And tell Fido he absolutely cannot, under any circumstances, ever dig there.

While you're thinking about those spring plants, check our website for upcoming seminars, Master Gardener certification classes, or other announcements at <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening>, or call us at [301-600-1596](tel:301-600-1596). You can find gardening information and advice online at:

- **University of MD Extension Home & Garden Information Center**, <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center>;
- **Frederick County Master Gardeners Publications**, <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening>;
- **Facebook**, <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>.



Pond: Garden ideas often come from visiting other friends' gardens. Inspired by others' ponds and waterfalls, our own pond, in places since the early 1990s, has undergone several iterations, this most recent one three years ago, built for us by a professional landscaper. (Photo courtesy of the author)

Père laChaise: In the Victorian era, many city cemeteries revamped and landscaped where possible to make the cemeteries more park-like. Here, a corner of Pere laChaise, a famed cemetery in Paris, begun in 1804, has been landscaped for a peaceful, refreshing change from the crowded graves in other areas of the cemetery. (Photo courtesy of the author)



Rhododendron: The author's father was very fond of rhododendron flowers, and during his life, both his wife and the author planted rhododendrons in their respective yards for his enjoyment. The flowers generated much discussion and reminiscences. (Photo courtesy of the University of Maryland Extension)

Peony: The author has quite a few heirloom peonies given to her by her maternal grandmother, as well as more modern hybrids from her husband's sister-in-law. (Photo courtesy of the University of Maryland Extension)



For more information about the Frederick County Extension Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, gardening information and advice visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland> . UME Home & Garden Information Center, <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center> .

University programs, activities, and facilities are available to all without regard to race, color, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, marital status, age, national origin, political affiliation, physical or mental disability, religion, protected veteran status, genetic information, personal appearance, or any other legally protected class.