

## Seven Healing Gardens

By Donna Demetillo

Philippine Daily Inquirer

First Posted 17:41:00 08/21/2010

Filed Under: Religions, Health, Food, Lifestyle & Leisure

BAGUIO CITY – Standing under a silver eucalyptus tree, its leaves glittering in the sunlight, the 70-year-old Benedictine nun recounts how a dying tree was nurtured back to life.

“Three years ago, she was already dying,” recalls Sr. Alice Sobrepeñas, OSB, a petite woman with a bubbly, singsong voice. “For a whole month, I did pranic healing, put compost and prayed over her.”

The sister talks animatedly as she walks through the gardens of the St. Scholastica Convent along Military Cut-Off here, stopping to bend over flowers and herbs to gently caress them and whisper to them.

“You’re entering a sacred place for prayer and meditation. Walk reverently,” she whispers to visitors as they enter a canopy of white moonflowers which the nuns call Grande Flora-White, interspersed with a Jade Vine heavy with orange-red blossoms and hanging yellow centers that look like fairy shoes. The Sisters of the Benedictine order in this convent like to call them Sapatos ni (shoes of) Imelda.

Further down the path is a tree stump with some words painted on it: “Heal mother earth and she will heal you. Let the flowers be. Find God in the garden. Enjoy, relax, just be.”

Here at the Seven Healing Gardens of Eden, amid maroon and violet monastery bells, one finds peace and positive energies that heal tired spirits and bodies.

According to Sobrepeñas, the garden was specifically designed as a circle, like a mandala to ensure the unhindered flow of energy. Within the big circle are seven smaller circular gardens.

“Energies go in circles,” she explains, adding that there are seven gardens because seven is a perfect number in Jewish tradition, having no beginning and no end. The seven healing gardens are also symbolic of the body’s major chakras or pools of energy, the strongest and central of which is found in the crown or head.

The first garden is the “Vegetable Garden,” where one finds plots of pechay and fennel dotted with bright marigolds that serve as natural pesticides, as well as climbing potatoes of the native species decoratively peeking from bamboo trellises. Whiffs of mint and menthol are carried by the wind from the “Herbal Garden” just a few yards away, where native and Indian Gota Cola (native ginseng), field



mint, menthol, damong maria, citronella, aloe vera, thyme, and fennel are grown in neat rows.

Eating three leaves of Indian Gota Cola a day, Sobrepeñas says, is good for one's memory and can help prevent Alzheimers' disease. Menthol is good for cough and colds, "damong maria" for stomach trouble and wounds, and fennel flowers, when mixed with lemon grass, make a great tea.

While many use cacti as mere ornamental plants, in Sobrepeña's "Cactus Garden," these thorny flora are highly regarded for their medicinal values. According to the nun, cactuses that have thorns are good radiation absorbers. In this garden, one finds 20 different varieties – Peach Cherry, Rosette Cactus, Cat's Tail, Zebra, Panda, Jade or Lucky Cactus, Rabbit's Ear, Chinese Holly, and Silver Rose Cactus, among others.

Gota Cola, parsley, and lettuce, to name a few, abound in the "Salad Garden," providing the nuns with a regular supply of fresh organic vegetables. The "Fruit Garden" offers fruit trees of jackfruit, atis, santol, lemon, star apple, and breadfruit enclosed in seven small circles of stone.

"We plant only what we can consume, and if there is a surplus, we give these away to friends," Sobrepeñas says. "Everything we use in the garden also come from the garden, so that we are sure all our compost are organic." Organic fruits and vegetables, she adds, help to heal the body.

"With proper food, we can work out our well-being," she explains. Sobrepeñas, a breast cancer survivor, says she got well without chemotherapy, curing herself only with a few tablets of commercial drugs, lots of prayers and good food.

In summertime, Cinderella spreads out her skirt when the clock strikes midnight. A type of cactus, the Cinderella Flower Summer behind a thick curtain of creeping plants hanging from a trellis is one of the attractions of the Flower Garden. In this rainbow-colored garden of violets, reds, pinks, oranges, whites and yellows, Sobrepeñas pauses to "listen to the music of the universe."

"If you remain still, you will be transported. It comes as a gift. Everyone has it but it depends on how a person receives it, how open a person is. It's like the bell of the sea," she muses.

But the greatest attraction of the place is the "Spirulina Garden" at the center of the expanse, much like the body's central chakra, with a statue of St. Benedict keeping watch over the pond of olive green water. Spirulina is a microscopic algae shaped like a perfect spiral coil. It is said to be the earliest living organism, present 3.5 million years ago. A blue-green algae, it produces oxygen in the atmosphere, allowing other life forms to evolve.

It is useful in detoxifying the body, strengthening the immune system, balancing cholesterol, raising energy levels, preserving youth, and was said to have been consumed by the Aztecs in Mexico over five centuries ago. Indigenous peoples of Africa also continue to consume Spirulina to this day. It has been recognized by the United Nations and the World Health Organization as a safe and nutritious food supplement even for pregnant women and children.

Spirulinas love to be stirred and played with, says Sobrepeñas. As such, mornings find the nuns praying and meditating, while circling the pond and gently stirring the water with long sticks. Every summer, Sobrepeñas harvests the Spirulina with a fine net, pulverizes and prays over it to make a facial cream and food supplement. It must be her fountain of youth for many are surprised that at her age she looks many years younger.

Sobrepeñas hails from Laguna, and used to be assigned at the St. Scholastica's Convent in West Grove in Cavite. In 2004, she transferred to Baguio City for spiritual renewal, and later discovered pranic healing. The St. Scholastica's Convent is the retirement home for elderly Benedictine nuns and there are only a handful in this airy space enjoying the bounty of the organic garden.

"The land is as sacred as life and should be cared for and made productive. We are stewards of the Earth, not its masters," Sobrepeñas explains, adding that the garden, as an Eden, reminds people of the harmonious relationship between humans, the environment, and God. She checks on rows of aloe vera, explaining that these were of the variety known to heal cancer. "There are many in the aloe vera family, but it is this kind with thorns on the side used to cure cancer," she says, adding that a book by Father Romano Zago, a Franciscan priest, gives the history and formula in using aloe vera as a cure for cancer.

The circle is closed with yacon leaves that can be brewed into tea and is said to be good for lowering blood pressure. As the nun pours the golden brew, she explains that tea leaves must not be dried under the sun, which can strip them of their nutrients, but in the shade of a well-ventilated room.

Sipping her tea, she looks out into her garden and says, "I learned the language of plants. I learned the secret to growing. I also learned to respect nature and to recognize and accept its natural power. I know that plants and the soil have a heart and they are alive. All we have to do is trust the soil."

Women's Feature Service