

January: Seeding



For there shall be a sowing of peace . . . and the heavens shall give their dew.

–Zechariah 8:12

A seed contains within itself all that is necessary for its future. Its entire code, the DNA for what it will become, is present. A fertile seed, defined as an embryo for plants or animals, will, if properly cared for, grow to completeness.

We can think of January as a time to consider what it is to be seeded. God has brought us forth from our mothers' wombs and planted in our souls the seeds of faith, hope, and love. From our infancy we were nurtured and with the right environment grew in grace. We were taught simple lessons such as the Golden Rule; God's seed of love was planted in our souls.

The garden—plants, butterflies, toads and snakes—is the ground of humility; it is not dependent upon me for its value in the design of creation.

Traditions and Feasts of January

Our Catholic Church has many traditions to help guide us in our faith. A portion of those traditions is through monthly, weekly, and

daily dedications. The month of January is traditionally dedicated to the Holy Name and Infancy of Jesus. Jesus, the seed of the new covenant, the seed of God planted in the Blessed Virgin Mary, was also an infant who had to be nurtured into adulthood. We begin the calendar year by honoring that childhood.

January 1 is layered with meaning. It is the Solemnity of Mary and commemorates the divine motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the God-bearer, the Holy Mother of God. It is also the Octave Day of the Nativity of the Lord.

Prior to Vatican Council II, January 1 was the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ. Luke's gospel (2:21) records that on this date Mary and Joseph, acting in obedience to the Mosaic Law found in Genesis 17:10–12, brought Jesus to be circumcised on the eighth day of his life. There is a deeper meaning in this action in that it symbolizes and foreshadows the blood Jesus will shed for us on the Cross.

On January 3 we honor the name that Mary and Joseph gave their infant boy at his circumcision, the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. From Luke 2:21, "And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." It is in this naming that we hear for the first time that God is among us. In a few weeks, on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, this name will reveal the promised joys and inevitable sorrows associated with it.

For now, we look toward the Nativity Star and the Epiphany of the Lord. Traditionally celebrated on January 6, the Twelfth Day of Christmas, the Feast of the Epiphany is now celebrated on the first Sunday after January 1. On this day we remember when the Magi, having traveled "from afar," finally met the newborn King. I remember as a child this day being called "Little Christmas."

My maternal grandmother was Italian, and in that culture many families celebrated gift giving to children on Epiphany, when gifts

are given in a way that relates to the gifts from the Magi. The more popular Christmas celebration in December was honored in our family, but I remember other children receiving three small gifts on this day.

It was also on the evening of Epiphany that the Christmas tree, originally known as the paradise tree, was taken down. The “gifts” we received on that night were the treats that had hung on the tree’s boughs. The still safely edible decorations were distributed among the children—I think more to keep us out of the way of the adults who were trying to wrap up the holiday season that, since the onset of Advent, had been in full swing for nearly six weeks!

On the Monday after Epiphany a traditional celebration by peasants in England used to take place. It was called Plow Monday, and here the plowing practices intersect the cycles of seasonal practices and Christian observances. This holiday concluded the twelve-day celebration of Christmas. “Plow Monday signaled a return to work: women resumed their hearth-side spinning, and men anticipated a return to the fields for the year’s first plowing, which occurred between Plow Monday (about January 7) and Candlemas (February 2) to allow time for the manure and stubble to decompose before planting began.”¹

Following Epiphany is the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Many of us were baptized in our infancy usually within a few days or at the most a couple weeks of our birth. It is a day of celebration for families when our souls are released from the original sin of Adam and Eve and we become daughters and sons of God, members of his Body, the Church. Parents promise to raise their children in the faith and appoint godparents to carry out this promise should they become unable to perform their duty.

Consider adding a holy water font at the entrance to your prayer garden as a reminder of your own baptism and then enter your space

having “blessed” yourself with the assurance of your continued growth toward God.

For Jesus, his baptism by John in the Jordan River took place as an adult and signaled the beginning of his ministry. Jesus shows us how to be born from above. The seed of God that was always present in Jesus now germinated. Jesus began his ministry as the Christ, the Son of God. This title is both inspiring to us as his followers and frightening. It is frightening in that his followers realized he was more than a prophet and miracle worker. He *is* the Son of God, able to manipulate the things of the earth and the Evil One. No one had ever been born who could do such things.

January Saints for the Gardener

If you can look into the seeds of time
 And say which grain will grow and which will not
 Speak then unto me.

–William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

January 13: St. Mungo (St. Kentigern), ca. 518–603

Patron against Bullies

St. Mungo, also known as St. Kentigern, is not well known, at least in the United States. Born in Scotland, he was an illegitimate child and given the endearing name Mungo (meaning “dear one”) by his tutor, St. Serf.

Mungo was a gifted boy and held a special place in the hearts of his teachers. For this, he was often the object of bullying by his peers at the monastery. At a very young age he began performing miracles. The most popular is the story of his bringing a red bird, which was

a pet owned by St. Serf, back to life after it was accidentally killed by the other children.

Another incident during his childhood happened when he was left in charge of the holy fire in the monastery. The young boy arose from sleep and found all the fires in the monastery had gone out through a treacherous act by his peers.

The boy in his frustration left the building and, into the early dawn of a winter's day, went out into the garden to the surrounding witch-hazel hedge. He took a branch from the bush and, turning to God, raised the branch, made the Sign of the Cross on it, and blessed it. As he finished his prayer and his frozen breath surrounded the branch, flames from heaven ignited the witch-hazel as he held it in his hand. And so Mungo entered the monastery with his little burning bush and relit the fires.

When Mungo traveled to Glasgow he drew together several monks in the region, who were living and farming independently, into a single monastery. He assigned each man duties based on their talents to increase agricultural production to feed the poor. This group of monks became the Glasgow Abbey.

For centuries to come, this saint would be honored for his love and dedication to the people of this region. The weeklong Festival of St. Mungo still takes place today in parts of the United Kingdom.

January 17: St. Antony of Egypt, 1195-1231

Extensive Patronage

St. Antony the Great of Egypt is best known as the father of monasticism. He is also one of only two saints who are the patrons of those who attend to graveyards or memorial gardens. This patronage came about because of a close friendship with another man of solitude, St. Paul, the first hermit.

Legend has it that the Holy Spirit moved St. Antony to leave his place of solitude and travel across the desert to the cave of St. Paul. Shortly after arriving, the elderly hermit died. Antony knew he had to bury his beloved friend but had nothing to dig the grave and could not leave the body to go and acquire the tool he needed. As he prayed to God for a solution to his dilemma, two huge lions came running toward him—poor Antony may have thought he was about to join his friend in death. The beasts stopped short beside the corpse and began to dig until a suitable grave was made. The story tells of how these lions then laid at the feet of St. Antony until he blessed them and, once received, ran back into the desert as the body of St. Paul was placed into the earth.

St. Antony supported himself in his latter years with his gardening and by making mats from the nearby supply of papyrus along the Nile.

Before he became a hermit at thirty-four he was a reluctant farmer, a necessity because of the need to care for his younger sister after the death of their parents. His call to follow the words of the gospel “to go and sell all that he had” led him to relinquish all he possessed, including his land—all three hundred fields. Setting aside enough money for his sister, he gave the remaining land to the people of his village and distributed the money among the poor. Having gained his freedom from worldly goods, he set off for the desert.

St. Antony is often depicted with swine in the background and has the additional patronage of hogs. There are many legends for why this patronage developed, and they include him having been a swineherd on the family farm, that the torments of the devil took on the partial form of a pig, and that pigs were a form of income for an order founded in his name. It seems the latter story has some foundation.

The Order of Hospitallers of St. Antony was founded in the 1100s and treated those who suffered from a common and severe vascular condition called *ergotism*. This disease is a direct result of a fungus that develops on rye seed. When consumed by mammals, the alkaloid buildup causes intense burning sensations in the limbs. The Order of Hospitallers became widespread over much of Western Europe, being skilled at treating those with "St. Antony's Fire." To raise alms they would ring bells, and later these bells were hung around the necks of their pigs that were sold as food to support the order and their cause.²

January 22: St. Vincent of Saragossa, ca. 304

Patron of Vintners

This saint was a Spanish martyr who is highly venerated for the manner in which he persisted in faith throughout his persecution. Because of his perseverance in his martyrdom he is revered in the Anglican, Eastern, and Catholic Churches.

According to legend, after being martyred his body was discarded into a bog. While it lay exposed ravens protected it from being devoured by wild animals and vultures. The enraged persecutors, seeing that the corpse was not being destroyed, retrieved the body, tied it to a millstone, and threw it into the sea. The next morning the body was found on the shore by St. Vincent's followers and taken to what is now known as Cape St. Vincent. It was there that a shrine was erected over his grave, which continues to be guarded by flocks of ravens.

There are several allusions to why St. Vincent is the patron of vine growers, the first being because his name could be interpreted as "the blood of the wine," *vin sang*. Another is that his feast day falls between the vine's dormant state and appearance of new growth, when pruning is to begin. It is believed that he protects the fields

against the frost that often occurs on or near his feast day, January 22, in Burgundy, France. An old proverb by an unknown author says that if the sun shines on his feast day then it will continue to shine throughout the month.

Remember on St. Vincent's Day,
 If that the sun his beams display,
 Be sure to mark the transient beam,
 Which through the casement sheds its gleam,
 For 'tis a token bright and clear
 Of prosperous weather all the year.³

And another proverb says,
 Upon St. Vincent's Day
 Winter begins anew or goes away.⁴

There is also a legend that tells about his donkey. During his travels throughout Spain, Vincent stopped by the edge of a vineyard to talk with the men working there. While he and the vine growers chatted, his donkey nibbled at the young vine shoots. Come the next harvest, it was discovered that the vine stock that had been browsed had produced more fruit than all the others. St. Vincent's donkey had invented the art of vine pruning.⁵

January 25: The Conversion of St. Paul

We know from the Bible that not all who knew of Jesus followed him or believed in his teachings. He was countercultural, a threat to all that had been held holy and sacred, and a threat to the way the People of God had lived for centuries. One man trying to protect his society from *that Jesus* was Saul who became the apostle Paul. We've all fought against change and know how hard it can be to let go of what is familiar. St. Paul took it to the extreme.

When I read about or hear at Mass about the conversion of St. Paul, I think about the canna seed. The canna seed has a very hard outer coat that must be nicked, known as scarification, in order to germinate. Scarification is the process of breaking down this protective seed coat either by natural means such as freezing and thawing or by purposefully scratching or nicking the seed. Once the hardened coat has a crack, it can break open and begin new life. For me the story of Saul's conversion in Acts 22:3–16 is God's scarifying a hardened heart.

January in the Garden

Let us praise God, who plants the seeds and reaps the harvest. Blessed be God forever.

—*A Book of Blessings*

Practical Gardening: Seeds

The word *seed* is both a noun and a verb. Technically, as a horticultural noun, it is a small, hard fruit or a mature fertilized plant ovule consisting of an embryo and its food source and having a protective coat.

If you are like me, you love seed catalogs; they evoke such hope! I peek at them quickly as they come into the house and then set them in a basket next to my reading table. When I have a block of time, which is easier to find in the winter, I pick up the stack, peruse their colorful pages, and dream.

And that is when I, and most of my gardening friends, get into a world of trouble. I have learned over the years that it is easier to abstain than to moderate. Here, I am going to try to help you moderate the length of your purchase order form.