Thoughts on the Student Memorial Garden

By Lynn M. Watson, Michigan Tech Gardener, 2-7-11

The Student Memorial Garden was created as a memorial to students and staff that have passed on while at Michigan Tech. It is a quiet aside, off the busy sidewalk that funnels students towards campus, from the eastern edge. Life bustles by this small garden of contemplation. The shelter offered by the White Firs already on site, as well as the enclosing, heat reflective wall of the Rozsa center, makes a natural planting niche. The garden has a circular path. This symbolizes a clock; finite time, in everyone’s life,

Each plant in this garden has a meaning in the ‘language of flowers’. This use of plants to communicate specific human emotions has played a part in all of human history. In 1884, Kate Greenaway’s ‘Language of Flowers’ \(^1\) was a popular book on the symbolism of flowers in Victorian England. This book is the basis for this garden.

Many of the garden’s plant species were brought to this area by the immigrants that came to the Keweenaw Peninsula to work in the mines. Populations from the British Isles, Europe and Scandinavia arrived with seeds tucked into their belongings, or accidently caught in the heavy seams of their shoes and clothes. These seeds would grow plants for eating, medicinal, or aesthetic reasons. Often easily recognized today, they helped make a house, a home. Some escaped these early gardens to become weeds in our native landscape. Set here, in a garden again, the beauty of these plants can be rediscovered.

Victorian England was a kingdom hugely interested in natural history and horticulture. It’s flotilla of ships brought plant specimens from all over the world to England’s eager gardeners. Kate Greenaway had a rich botanical legacy to choose from. Kate Greenaway’s book of 1884 used common names to identify over 780 species. Many

\(^1\) Kate Greenaway (Catherine) *Language of flowers*. London: G. Routledge and Sons, [1884]:Avenel 1979 Edition
factors can earn a plant its label in 'flower language'. Some factor's can be imagined in these names:

Flower form: Venus' Car - Fly with me (Bleeding heart)
Growth habit: Coreopsis - Always Cheerful (Perennial, yellow flowered bloomer.)
Stem extensions: Bramble - Remorse (Thorns!)
Medicinal use: Agrimony- Thankfulness. Gratitude (Tincture is a fever reliever).

The everyday names offered in Greenaway's book were translated into scientific species names by researching the over 175 plants represented in the Student Memorial Garden. These interesting names are included on the garden labels, along with the modern day equivalents. In this garden, plant identification includes the floral meaning, common name, and scientific name. (The genus that was historically correct in England has had some substitutions in this garden site, at the species level.)

The plants in this sunny, southern garden are selections that would grow here, in a 4-6 planting zone. They are planted in the 'Lasagna Method'. This old/modern method builds soil, retains moisture and suppresses weeds. It returns control to the gardener in terms of rampant root runners and self seeding. Organic mulch is thinner where a drier, sandier soil is needed for some plants. It is drip irrigated.

Grieving is a process that has been found to have a specific coping and healing progression. Here is a model of grieving whose elements are addressed in The Student Memorial Garden.

The plants listed below each stage are examples of some of the species representing the emotions in the Kübler-Ross grief cycle.²

**The Extended Grief Cycle**

“*The Extended Grief Cycle can be shown as in the chart below, indicating the roller-coaster ride of activity and passivity as the person wriggles and turns in their desperate efforts to avoid the change.*

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The initial state before the cycle is received is stable, at least in terms of the subsequent reaction on hearing the bad news. Compared with the ups and downs to come, even if there is some variation, this is indeed a stable state.

And then, into the calm of this relative paradise, a bombshell bursts…”

(These are the stages with some of the garden’s examples):

**Shock stage**: Initial paralysis at hearing the bad news

- Silence: Deadly Nightshade
- Stoicism: Box tree

**Denial stage**: Trying to avoid the inevitable

- Cure for heart ache: Cranberry
- Alas! My poor heart: Red Carnation
- Separation: Ash leaved Trumpet Flower

**Anger stage**: Frustrated outpouring of bottled-up emotion

- Betrayed: White catchfly
- Bravery and humanity: French Willow
- Justice shall be done you: Tussilage (Coltsfoot)

**Bargaining stage**: Seeking in vain for a way out

- Forget me not: Forget me not
- Anxious trembling: Red Columbine
- Pity: Pine
**Depression stage:** Final realization of the inevitable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Absence</th>
<th>Wormwood</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorrow</td>
<td>Yew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remorse</td>
<td>Raspberry, blackberry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tears</td>
<td>Helenium (Helen’s flower)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Testing stage**: Seeking realistic solution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reconciliation</th>
<th>Hazelnut</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unchanging Friendship/Live for me</td>
<td>Arbor Vitae</td>
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</table>

**Acceptance stage:** Finally finding the way forward...

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Affection beyond the Grave</th>
<th>Green Locust Tree,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remembrance</td>
<td>Lilac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return of Happiness</td>
<td>Lily of the Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Flowering Almond</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More plants representing these healing emotions are in the garden. Other plants are grown because their meanings remind us of an individual’s personality: the unique combination of traits that marks a person’s place in humanity. Thinking about the person lost, and our relationships to them, takes time. Take the time, to think on these things. Walk the path. Sit on a bench. Think on what would be remembered about you. Come, visit often: in seasons, in daytime, in moonlight.