



Garden Profile

*By Ellen Vincent, Clemson University
Environmental Landscape Specialist*

Mepkin Abbey



Close your eyes. Go ahead, try it. What do you smell? What sounds come to you? Now don't forget to breathe-there you go. If you are at Mepkin Abbey there's a good chance you'll hear the piercing cry of the hawk, a mower with a low hum, and the chatter of people shopping in the retail store. Then there is the silence. Then there is the sound of the boat engine roaring on the Cooper. Does that disturb the monks here? Perhaps, but it comes with the territory. For this group of twenty men belong to an order that engages with community. They have taken a vow of hospitality. And they have taken a vow to live sustainably on the earth, honoring all its inhabitants.

Vivian Whorley, horticulturist at Mepkin Abbey drives three hours a day to work here. Why does she do that? Whorley replies, "I love the silence. It's a peaceful place, I work with plants." Whorley used to be a hairdresser before earning her bachelor's and master's degrees in horticulture and moving to South Carolina from Virginia. She truly appreciates the quiet. "The quiet is so satisfying, especially after having been a hairdresser for all those years with all that talking," she says.

The people at Mepkin Abbey are another reason Whorley makes the long drive every day. "The monks are so good to me, they are extremely generous," she claims. She says she's given guidelines and then left alone to imagine and interpret the work. She also values the opportunity to work with the Master Gardeners who support the Abbey by volunteering. Lastly, it is the relationship between the Abbey and the community that wins her admiration. "I can't seem to leave. I like what they want to do with the land. They share it with other people while they still have their life style, which is very private. But they want to preserve this land and share it with the public. This is the higher pursuit that draws me."

Tom Mahan retired from BP and Amoco after 31 years. Then he enrolled in the Charleston County Master Gardener program and picked Mepkin Abbey as his volunteer work site. He started volunteering in 2006 and now he

receives cash for his labor. What keeps him there? "This Place is Spectacular. I'm here for the same reasons people come here for retreats. The monks are engaging guys. The place is wonderful, peaceful, inviting, and welcoming."

Mepkin Abbey is located in Moncks Corner, down a heavily wooded road dotted with various denominations of churches. You enter the Abbey and travel slowly down a lane lined with live oaks, and in the spring, the dogwoods at the woods edge are in raging bloom. Within a minute or two you'll arrive at the Reception Center - there is a small car park there and a low wooden structure that serves as a retail store.

The store carries Mepkin Abbey eggs, bottled water, and "Drizzle". Drizzle is a sweet sauce in a sleek bottle that received rave reviews in the Charleston news from local chefs. In addition to food products, they produce and package bagged compost and boxed compost tea on site for garden use. Mepkin Abbey compost is also available for sale at local garden centers. Honey, jams, coffee, and a delectable assortment of chocolates from other Trappist monasteries are available for purchase as well as an ample collection of reflective art work, books, and music.

Just beyond the car park and shop are two landscape spaces which might catch your eye. There appear to be a group of people walking slowly in a concentric circle in the middle of meadow. What's odd is that they are not chatting, they're leaving sufficient space between themselves as they walk. They are doing what people throughout the world have been doing for over 4,000 years. They are walking the labyrinth. Here is a collection of walkers who opt for the labyrinth over the mall and Mepkin Abbey maintains a labyrinth mailing list. Labyrinth literature states:

"There are many ways and reasons to walk the labyrinth-for prayer, centering, problem-solving, walking meditation, reflection, inspiration, etc. Walking the labyrinth is a personal experience and there is no right or wrong way to walk."

Here at Mepkin Abbey the labyrinth is mowed by volunteers. Mike Yaeger knew a group was coming to walk the labyrinth this day so he arrived several hours early to perform the first cut of the season. The paths are 5' wide and there are tree stumps available to rest on. The mowed labyrinth was designed by a Knoxville, Tennessee firm. The labyrinth meadow peaks in October according to Father Gueric. "It comes into its glory the first week in October when the native grasses and wildflowers are in bloom", he reports.

Also in the meadow are nine concrete cubes, arranged in a circle. They circle a center piece that has a simple cross engraved on its flat surface. Surrounding the space are nine overcup oaks (*Quercus lyrata*). This space is a memorial to the nine Charleston firefighters who perished in the blaze of June 2007.

The design is an adapted Council Ring, a symbol of democracy created by landscape architect Jens Jenson (1865-1936) combining design elements from his native Danish folk tradition with the council fires of the Native Americans. The "Mepkin Firefighters' Council Ring" was designed by J.R. Kramer, a local landscape architect with Remark Studio. Instead of the traditional fire pit at the center, Kramer chose to install a mini-altar with the cross pointing in all four directions. The altar symbolizes the sacrifice these men made to their community. Father Gueric says the oaks were chosen because they are sturdy and strong trees. "They represent the strength and valor of these firefighters." Interpretive literature describes the Council Ring as useable for people to "participate in





free and honest discussion; to read poetry or tell stories; to act out dramas, and simply to meditate especially on humanity's relationship with Nature."

You, as a green industry professional, have a lot in common with the monks of Mepkin Abbey. When you work in the landscape, you have the opportunity to immerse yourself with plants, animals, the elements, and like minded people. When you do your work, using methods that are gentle on the environment (right plant right place, selecting pest resistant plants, soil protection and organic soil building), you enhance the quality of life for all.

There is change afoot at the Abbey. You can smell it in the air. And it centers on native plants. Father Gueric Heckel is Native Plant Manager and is partnering with many university, private, and government agencies to create a native plant Mecca for South Carolina at Mepkin Abbey. There is a Native Plant Botanical Garden on the design table, a native woodland garden, and native plant propagation and seed production. The Abbey occupants largely sustain themselves through revenue generation and are transitioning from a commitment to egg production to native plants. They hope to generate enough seed to make it possible for others in the southeast to plant meadows, gardens, and containers of indigenous species.

"The monks of Mepkin Abbey, through their botanical garden, give voice to the generations of people who have lived along the Cooper River so that visitors may cultivate in themselves an inward and outward care for the land."
Mission Statement 2000

Native plants, according to Father Gueric offer a host of ecologically sound benefits. "They are drought tolerant, they provide habitat for wildlife, and they require less fertilizer." In addition, he claims, "The native plants are plants of the place. They identify the place we live. They make good sense rather than making plants grow where they aren't suited." They are also beautiful claims Father Gueric. "If you take a wild plant from the roadside and give it care, you'd be surprised how showy it can be." There will be more meadows at Mepkin Abbey in addition to those surrounding the labyrinth and Firefighters' Council Ring. Interpretation and education are also being designed for visitors. Every plant in the botanical garden will be labeled with its common and botanical name.

Eradication of exotic weeds and grasses is an educated undertaking at Mepkin Abbey. The grounds are managed with fire. Westvaco

assists with controlled burns that help stimulate native plant seeds and reduce the viability of some exotics. Bahaigrass was eliminated in the labyrinth meadow and replanted with six types of goldenrod, 10 native grasses, and ox-eye daisy. The US Fish and Wildlife Service is partnering with Mepkin Abbey to eradicate invasive Johnsongrass from the proposed native grass seed propagation area. They plant intensively to discourage invasives and apply glyphosate as needed. "Round-up is my constant companion," confesses Father Gueric.

On the way to the formal Luce Garden, you may pass two interesting sculptures. The first is cut of classic marble, set among magnolia trees, and marks the entrance to the Secular Cemetery. It is called "Jesus and John" and is the work of American sculptor William Ordway Partridge (1861-1930). This piece used to stand at the Brooklyn Museum of Art where it was vandalized. This caused a member of the Museum Board of Directors, Henry Luce III, to have the piece given to Mepkin Abbey. The second sculpture is chainsaw carved into a live oak that was felled by Hurricane Hugo. Its figures are one of the most photographed features on the site. Another sculpture of interest to professional plant people is found in the Luce Garden. It is a portion of a live oak filled with concrete blocks, a common practice in the past used to stabilize hollow trees.

The formal Luce Garden is classical Italian. Brick walkways and camellia hedges frame views of the Cooper River. Magnolias and live oaks cast the needed shade. This historic garden was designed by Loutrelle Briggs for the Luce family. The story is that Clare and Henry were out boating on the Cooper River one day and they came on shore here. Clare fell for the beauty of the place and said she wanted to buy this plantation. Henry made it happen. Their attachment to the place is evident by the tombstones that form a focal point in the Luce Garden. They, and several other members of the family, are buried here. Father Gueric points to a nearby pond and shares that this will be an aquatic native plant garden. The atamasco lily (*Zephyranthes atamasco*) a native Easter lily, grows on the bank and shows its star shaped white flower in early April.

Tom Mahan works primarily in the Luce Garden, clearing exuberant vines off the azaleas and camellias, pruning, and fertilizing. He says sometimes he goes to the lower part of the garden and just stands there for a moment. An eagle flying overhead, the wind blowing off the water, and sweet fragrances all at one time can be a bit distracting. He again claims Mepkin Abbey is a spectacular place. "There's an unbelievable live oak

specimen here, but then there are probably 100 others I haven't seen yet."

With all the emphasis on native plants, don't think for a moment that the cultural history of the site will be ignored. Interpretative literature, tours, and signage will all tell the story of the place and honor its past. The *Garden Guidebook* is available now. The words read like poetry and the photography is shot by landscape photographer Tom Blagden Jr. The *Guidebook* claims the Mepkin site originally served as Native American hunting grounds. In 1762, American patriot Henry Laurens purchased Mepkin. In 1936 noted publisher and philanthropist Henry R. Luce (*Time*, *Fortune*, *Life*, and *Sports Illustrated*) and his wife the Honorable Clare Boothe Luce (playwright, congresswoman, and ambassador to Italy) purchased the place. In 1949 the Luce family donated much of the land to the Abbey of Gethsemani intending that a monastic order be founded at Mepkin.

You can access Mepkin Abbey in several ways. First there's a web page that gives you a taste of who the monks are, what they do, and how you can visit for a day, a week, or longer. You can spontaneously appear at the Abbey Tuesday through Saturday between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. and on Sunday from 1:00 to 4:30 p.m. to walk the mowed labyrinth, or visit the formal Luce Garden. Guided tours of the monastery are given at 11:30 and 3:00 daily. Docent guided garden tours are available for a fee and require a reservation. Or you can call or e-mail and reserve a room for a business retreat or other gathering. Food can be provided for your meeting upon request. Self-guided tours are available free of charge for now. As more garden destinations appear, especially the native plant botanical garden, an admission charge will be a component of their revenue generation. Want to impress your retail customers? You can stock Mepkin Abbey compost and compost tea on your shelves.

The monks, thirty volunteers, plus two horticulturists, one full-time and one part-time tend to the 3,100 acres of land. But don't worry; the land is not destined for development any time soon. They established a conservation easement for their lands and combined with like-minded neighbors, there is 20,000 acres protected around them.

"If we learn to love the Earth, we will find labyrinths, gardens, fountains and precious jewels. A whole new world will open itself to us. We will discover what it means to be truly alive." -Teresa of Avila (in *Mepkin Abbey Labyrinth brochure*)