

St. Fiacre, Patron Saint of Gardeners

If you see a statue of a saint in a garden, more than likely it's St. Francis with bird on his shoulder. St. Francis may have protected the birds and animals of the garden, but the actual patron saint of gardening is an Irish monk named St. Fiacre, whose feast is celebrated in Ireland and France on September 1.

St. Fiacre has been recognized as patron saint of gardeners (as well as cab drivers and florists, among other things) since medieval times. Born in Ireland in the 7th century, Fiacre was raised in a monastery. During the Dark Ages, monasteries were repositories of learning, and it is here that Fiacre became a skillful user of healing herbs. As he earned fame for his knowledge of plants and healing abilities, disciples flocked to him. Fiacre sought more solitude and left Ireland for France where he established a hermitage in a wooded area near the Marne River. Here Fiacre built an oratory in honor of the Virgin Mary and a hospice where he received strangers. He himself retreated to a solitary cell, living a life of prayer and manual labor in his garden.

The legend upon which Fiacre's sainthood rests is this: Fiacre asked the local bishop, Bishop Faro, for more ground on which to plant food and herbs. Faro told him he could have as much land as he could entrench in one day. After prayer, Fiacre used the point of his staff to turn the earth, topple trees and dig up briars and weeds to prepare the land for a garden. (Don't we all wish we had one of those staffs?) A suspicious local woman was convinced that such a feat could only be performed by sorcery. Bishop Faro, however, viewed Fiacre's act as a gift from God and proclaimed it a miracle. Supposedly, the woman's jealousy caused Fiacre to implement a ban on women from his monastery. Exclusion of women, however, was the rule rather than the exception in monasteries of the time.

As word of Fiacre's miracle spread, people began flocking to him for food, healing and wisdom. He once again was venerated by followers, and a monastery was formed. The monastery grew fruits and vegetables to feed the hungry and cultivated herbs and flowers to use in healing the sick. Visitors to Fiacre's garden brought seeds and plants from afar, and his gardens became famous throughout Europe.

After his death in 670 A.D., people who visited his monastery claimed that it had healing power. His shrine at Breuil is still a destination for pilgrims seeking relief from ailments. Fiacre's feast day is a matter of debate. Some sources list it as August 31, others as Sept. 1, yet others August 1, 18, or 11. The Catholic Church considers Fiacre the saint of growing food and plants used in medicine. This was broadened to include all of gardening. And how did Fiacre become the patron saint of taxi cab drivers? It began at the Hotel de Saint Fiacre in Paris, which rented carriages. People began referring to these small hackney carriages as "Fiacre cabs", and then just "fiacres". Thus their drivers took on St. Fiacre as their patron and protector.



Fiacre is depicted in art and statuary as an elderly man carrying a spade. His fictional counterpart is Brother Cadfael, the mystery-solving monk of the Ellis Peters novels. Like the real monk Fiacre, Brother Cadfael is a gardener and herbalist in a time when herbs were not just pretty or tasty, but an essential part of medicine.

by [Gwen Bruno \(gwen21\)](#)