



(L to r) Brother Michael, brother Richard and brother Columba in the priory garden.

Learning in the Garden

Paradisus Claustralis (Garden of Paradise)

— an essay inspired by brother Columba

SINCE THE EARLIEST DAYS OF WESTON PRIORY BROTHERS tilled the soil and learned in the garden. In the beginning it was not exactly the Garden of Eden. Digging between rocks, weeds and thistles, the brothers managed to harvest a few hearty crops like rhubarb and cabbage. Brothers lived “by the sweat of their brows.” It was a rough start and a humble contribution to the already spare diet that graced the monastery table.

Gradually brothers became aware of the Vermont tradition, imported by Yankee settlers from England, of the valuable methods of organic gardening. Besides they could ill afford the expensive and more sophisticated herbicides and fertilizers. The abundant chickens, pigs and cows contributed to the fertility of the soil at no extra cost! (Compost was limited as there were few scraps from the spare table.) With time, as more varieties of vegetables were introduced, brothers discovered the value of



Corn, squash and pumpkin in the priory garden.

rotating crops. This was especially true of potatoes which seemed to be a delight for beetles that flourished and could only be removed by hand.

With time, the brothers discovered that not only the beetles could delight in the garden, but the contact with generous mother earth in a caring way could also be an exciting and delightful adventure. A little competition with mice, rodents, deer, ground hogs, and Canadian geese stimulated brothers' ingenuity and challenged the spirit of gentleness and compassion for creation in all its chaotic generosity and beauty.

Weston, while blessed with sun and rain, is also burdened with frosts in the spring and in the fall. No way to compete with all of that. It only emphasizes the variety of brothers' temperaments—optimists set the growing season from May to October; on the other hand, the majority hope for June to September, or at least the 4th of July. The wheelbarrow still vies with the garden cart which provides stability for our aging brothers. The little garden tractor and mechanical cultivator lure brothers who aspire to greater yields of produce from the rich loom of our communal garden.

Now the summer table at the Priory is graced with string beans, broccoli, carrots, corn, herbs kale, peas, pumpkins, tomatoes, Swiss chard, and of course potatoes. Squash and cabbage, remnants of the earliest bounty, last far into the winter and sunflowers seduce the bees all season long.

The garden—what a rich school for the love of learning and the desire for God! *A Paradisus Claustralis!* ■