

Sister Act

She's been lauded for her nursing career and her gardening projects, but this octogenarian doesn't plan on slowing down...



BY SARAH LANG

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK COOTE

At age 81, Sister Loyola Galvin was blown down a bank by a gust of wind while tending her vegetable gardens at Our Lady's Home of Compassion in Island Bay in Wellington, New Zealand. The sprightly sister wasn't going to let a double pelvis fracture and ruptured right-arm tendon stand in the way of her ministry to the four-hectare grounds, however.

Now 88, the former nurse ignored the doctor's warning to take it easy while recovering. "I may be over 80, but I'm pretty fit", notes Loyola, a

Sister of Compassion for over 60 years who calls everyone "dear".

Forget walking, just get gardening, she told herself at the time of her injury, and promptly commandeered an old wheelchair and fitted it with a battery. At first she could only motor around on flat areas, but soon she was careening up hillocks in order to tend every corner of her domain. "It was a question of getting past the pain barrier," she says matter-of-factly. In five months, Loyola was back to full mobility and full gardening duties.

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Full bloom:
even a fractured
pelvis didn't stop
Sister Loyola
gardening

Since “retiring” 15 years ago, Loyola has gradually transformed the home’s grounds into a green oasis. While her fellow sisters enjoy the sight and smells of their favourite blooms, Loyola’s speciality is vegies: broccoli, beans, cabbages, cauliflowers, carrots, celery, potatoes, lettuces. “Everything you can grow for a salad”, and most other vegetables you could think of, feed the 20-or-so nuns and their guests – such as midwives, who use the rooms for conferences.

Any extras go to the Suzanne Aubert Compassion Centre’s soup kitchen. Run by the nuns in the city centre since 1907, it serves up a hot meal each evening to 60-100 people. Recently, when past-their-prime potatoes were donated to the soup kitchen, Loyola chopped up the tired vegetables for compost and replaced them with spuds fresh from the ground.

Once she’s finished her daily prayers, Loyola is usually out in the garden from first light until dusk, seven days a week. Gardening according to permaculture’s holistic, sustainable philosophy, Loyola never uses chemical pesticides or fertiliser, and recycles materials wherever possible to spare both the planet and her meagre budget. Stacked bottles and tyre “fences” are wind-breaks; cardboard is a base for raised beds; and plastic milk bottles (with bottoms cut off)

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shield small seedlings. Five colossal compost bins are perpetually refilled with everything from seaweed gathered from the nearby beach to horse manure scooped up from neighbouring stables, then covered with an old carpet and left to “cook” for four to five months. “It’s layered like a club sandwich,” says a proud Loyola, who’s happy to pass on the recipe to anyone who asks.

What Loyola relishes about gardening is the creativity it unleashes – and the palpable sense of life’s endless cycle. It also helps keep her strong. “I’ve met a lot of people gardening in their 80s and they’re fit, healthy and enjoying life.”

Six years ago, at Loyola’s request, the Home of Compassion employed an intellectually and physically handicapped man in the garden full-time. “When you’re 40-something and you’ve always been considered unemployable, that’s tough,” she says. “I’ve always tried to encourage people to do what they can do, rather than worrying about what they can’t.”

The unassuming sister got a shock – and some welcome garden-store vouchers – when she won the 2008 NZ Gardener of the Year title from a pool of regional winners. The award recognised her efforts, including her encouragement of other green fingers in the community.



Chard yakka: Loyola’s produce feeds her fellow nuns, their guests and a local soup kitchen

fixture in New Zealand, the Common Ground scheme still thrives today. Thirty land-hungry Wellingtonians tend small individual plots and a large communal space, working collectively according to a permaculture ethos. They now have their own toolshed, fruit trees, herb garden and composting system.

Paying her \$10 membership levy along with everyone else, Loyola often climbs the hill to see how the other members are going, offering a quiet word of advice when needed.

“Sister Loyola is an inspiration, not just in gardening but in life,” says member Kate Smith, 47.

While taking a permaculture course in the early 1980s, for example, Loyola met a teenager who, like his friends, didn’t have a backyard, but wanted to grow vegetables. She subsequently ran an idea past her fellow sisters of the order: should they let the teenagers use a corner of the grounds? The response was yes.

Begun in 2005, before community gardens went from a rarity to a regular

Advising novice gardeners is an extension of a lifetime spent teaching both nurses and nuns. “I’ve had trainees tacked around my neck for years!” Loyola says with a laugh. “Anybody who’s wanted to learn, I’ve felt that’s wonderful.”

Loyola is also a trustee of the Manawa Karioi Ecological Restoration Project, which restores native plants and wildlife to Island Bay’s coastal



“I lost someone very special in the war who I would have settled down with”

hills, next door at Tapu Te Ranga Marae. Her gardening work comes after a long nursing career, honoured by a Queen's Service Medal in 1996. Although ironically, Loyola's nursing career almost never happened.

At the age of ten, she contracted osteomyelitis, a bone infection, after an ankle injury. Four years in and out of hospital was both her call to nursing and the reason why her first application to training school failed. She only got in, she says, in 1943, because the examining doctor was called to treat Japanese prisoners of war who'd been shot during a strike at a nearby military base. Rushing off, he gave her foot only a cursory look.

For many years, Loyola mainly

nursed polio-afflicted and other handicapped children at Home of Compassion facilities around New Zealand. In the late '50s and early '60s, she worked in Australia, with geriatric patients at Wagga Wagga and outback orphans at Broken Hill. The final 14 years of her official career were spent as chaplain at Hutt Hospital, where she supported parents with disabled

or stillborn babies and helped set up a nationwide stillbirth-support organisation. Working with children, she says, was the next best thing to having her own.

“I had the same interest in men that most young people had; a normal social life and relationships. But I lost someone very special in the war who I would

have settled down with.”

And taking her vows at 26 is a decision she has never regretted. Loyola waves away mention of the thousands of patients, children, parents, colleagues and gardeners whose lives she has brightened and whose bellies she has filled. “Really, I'm just a silly old girl who's still enjoying life immensely,” she says – with a young girl's twinkle in her eyes. n

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