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The Shakespeare Garden

Dedicated October 6, 1993

Rosalind Srb Mayberry

*I know a bank where the wild thyme grows
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk roses, and with eglantine.*

—A Midsummer Night's Dream

I love this place, this little corner, this little plot of land. I love it because it brings people together—staff, students and faculty from all departments. They come daily to wander, to read or talk, to eat a quiet lunch, to nap in the warm sun. It brings them together with place, with memory and imagination. Shakespeare dwells here. Mad Ophelia wanders through, distraught, gathering her morbid weeds and flowers, and Perdita hands flower favors to guests. It is the bank where the wild thyme grows, where Titania and Oberon joust and join.

The Shakespeare Garden is the result of hours of plotting, digging, planting, weeding and mowing, work done by GVSU faculty, staff, and students. The plants were mostly donated by friends of the garden, often from their own home gardens. From Ursula Franklin, a rose bush which in a heroic splash put forth a final red bloom in mid-September. A damask rose Sarah Culver spirited away from the family homestead. Another climbing rose from Laura Salazar, daffodils from Nathalie Ostroot Snyder, strawberries and spearmint from Carol Dewitt, irises and pink mallow from Carol Winters, peonies from Dolly Mapes, a spiny thistle from Milt Ford and English ivy, Don and Marie Hall's only rhubarb plant, a gleaming yellow evening primrose from Loretta Wasserman's old house in Spring Lake, a flat of calendulas from Bill Baum, honesty and a buttercup my sister and I dug up by the side of the road at six one foggy Saturday morning, ginger and bedstraw from my parents' garden in upstate New York. Some days I find offerings of plants left anonymously by the bird bath. Passers-by drawn into the garden one day return the next with plants from their gardens. Ceramic markers, made by Daleene Menning for the garden, name the plants and evoke the concrete world of Shakespeare.

Those plants carry and join with the characters and moments in Shakespeare's poetry the images and memories of this garden--of Carol Winters and Ron Dwelle busting sod; of Barb Roos and Ursula Franklin planting bulbs in an icy drizzle; of Ben Lockerd planting pear trees in the heavy clay soil; of Jo Miller on her hands and knees pulling out weeds at the foot the statue of the Bard; of David Huisman, the garden's official photographer, bent in close on the waving long purples. Students often stop and ask to help, offering to put in an hour of weeding between classes. A Shakespeare class occasionally meets here. Art and photography students make

pictures in the garden. In the summer, kids in the summer programs come to collect insects and to eat the strawberries.

The garden brings us together with the rest of the spirited world, with this place and the creatures who inhabit it in spite of us. Deer mark the snow with their hoof prints when they come in the winter to gnaw at the quince. Orange and black monarch butterflies land briefly on the swaying purple asters. Bright green grasshoppers warm themselves on the old stone wall. And in the summer, goldfinches swoop in, and the hummingbirds hover by the bee balm and dart in and out of the centers of the crimson crepe-paper hibiscus flowers. Last spring, the delicate blue flax plant sheltered a nest of rabbits who eventually moved into the more protective thorny quince.

By Grand Valley landscaping standards—evenly spaced trees encircled by gravel, bedding plants ordered in wood chips—the Shakespeare Garden is a messy spot. The ground is uneven. The grass, though green, is mostly coarse crab grass, cat mint and Creeping Charlie. The edges of the dirt flower beds, evened occasionally by hand spades, frazzle quickly as the grass creeps in and the thyme fingers out. The garden is a place of convergence, a place where the usual lines of distinction grow hazy. The wild and the tamed merge. Volunteer weeds settle comfortably alongside the carefully planted. Next to the stiff leaves of the iris, a flea bane thrives, the fine white petals of its small flower surrounding a sunny yellow eye. Reality and imagination, world and stage merge. In the garden performances, the actors spin and turn among us, brush against us, speak to us. We are in the play. We are the play. The bronzed Shakespeare watches with amused gaze and Robin Goodfellow lulls, wakes us to dream with watery music.

Footnote of thanks to President Lubbers for fostering the idea; to Carol Dewitt, Randy Drewry and Bob Whitacre of Plant services who have been in on this from the first seed of an idea proposed to Ron VanSteeland; Cecil Johnson and his Pioneer Construction crew who poured cement and Sam Evans of Marne who poured the bases for the bust and fountain and set them in place here. Thanks to Garden Fund contributors. Thanks to students Mary Jane Henningsen, Aram Snyder and Rick Stygstra, who planned the layout and made the formal presentation to the administration, and to Katherine Mayberry, who dug into Shakespeare for plants and pored over gardening books to discover what would grow here. Thanks to Dick Paschke for statue and fountain, to Don Hall for the arbor, and to Daleene Menning for plant labels. Thanks to the merry bands of planters and weederers: Carol Dewitt, Jo Miller, Carol Winters, Sharon Whitehill, Milt Ford, Patricia Clark, Nancy Brown, Sarah Culver, Dale Schriemer. Thanks to all the players, reciters, singers who bring Shakespeare to life in the garden. Thanks to all who lie about and read and dream.