News
EarthBeat



Father Alexander Tigga, pastor of St. James the Apostle Parish in Coolidge, Ariz., is pictured standing in the parish prayer garden April 17, 2024, next to the church. (OSV News/Carissa Krautscheid, New Outlook)

Carissa Krautscheid

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Coolidge, Arizona. — May 9, 2024
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One year ago St. James the Apostle Church in Coolidge stood in a sea of concrete, asphalt and gravel. Waves of heat streamed off sunbaked surfaces that blinded parishioners as they dashed from their cars to the shelter of the church.

Father Alexander Tigga arrived in Coolidge during the peak of summer, yet was undaunted by the heat and stone. The master gardener has planted gardens all around the globe, wherever he is sent as a missionary priest with the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales.

With gardens in three continents, Alex has cultivated the earth and transformed empty spaces into thriving gardens. Alex first learned about plants from his father, who was a farmer in India. He planted gardens at his seminary before being sent to Africa, where fruit trees he planted are still producing good fruit. "Wherever I go, I plant beautiful gardens," he said.

In the Diocese of Tucson, Alex first planted a garden in Kearny at Infant Jesus of Prague Parish, then at St. Therese of Lisieux Parish in Patagonia, which became a sort of tourist destination for visitors and photographers.

Coming from the cooler, greener Patagonia, Alex became pastor of St. James the Apostle Parish in July 2023. The parishioners were already eager to make a prayer garden.

After meeting and brainstorming, the parish community decided to proceed and was able to raise enough funds to create a prayer garden. "It was very dry, dead, and lifeless. So, I wanted to help bring some life to the community. There should be some life," the priest told New Outlook, Tucson's diocesan online news outlet.

"We started digging in July," Alex said. "It was very hard because it was so hot. I brought some plants from Patagonia, but they were drying away. Keeping them alive was difficult."

The pastor and his parishioners installed water irrigation, statues and benches. Now, just 10 months later, parishioners and visitors can pray in a lush flower garden nestled behind the parish office. The property is already transformed by the cooling and comforting presence of greenery, blooming flowers of every color and new fruit trees beginning to take root.

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"Whoever comes, they leave happy," said Alex. "Many of them have started planting gardens at their own houses. They realize they can do it. Some will ask me what to plant and when."

The spring flowers currently blessing the St. James the Apostle community were planted back in September and October. Summer blooms, such as sunflowers, bougainvillea and yellow bells were planted in February and March. "They're growing now," the pastor said. "They can bear the sun and give flowers, but we have to provide the water."

In less than a year, the parish grounds are now flourishing: existing trees grow greener than before, flowers line the gravel lot used for parish fiestas, a vegetable garden takes root behind the rectory, and the prayer garden welcomes visitors of people and pollinators alike.

While tending the plants, Alex also sees gardening as a way to care for his own body and soul. Physically, he said, "gardening is a good habit. It refreshes your mind and relaxes you. It gives you exercise and keeps you young. People tend to think I'm 15 or 20 years younger than I am."

Gardening also nurtures and inspires the spiritual life. "You think a lot about God's creation while gardening, and how we are participating in God's creation. It allows time for meditative prayer. The spiritual life and gardening go together. The garden helps people to pray and brings an atmosphere of prayer."

By taking part in God's creation, the pastor is using his God-given gifts for gardening to make the world a more beautiful place. Alex leaves a parish more beautiful than when he found it.

"My gardens bring happiness to people," he said. "They leave smiling."