



October 2025

For much of September, it felt as if autumn had come early this year. Beginning with the very first day of September, morning temps were often in the 60s and most of the daytime temps remained comfortably in the 80s. The cooler temps energized and uplifted us and the grounds of Mepkin reflect that. The long hot summer has ended, and the promise of a new season has begun.

In last month's newsletter, I put out a call for photos and I am so pleased to report that in true Mepkin fashion, our volunteers heeded the call. As a result, this month's newsletter not only contains more scenes of volunteer activities, it reveals as well the "Mepkin spirit" that makes our volunteer program unique. Thanks so much to everyone who endeavored to capture the beauty and grace that is our beloved Mepkin Abbey. The stories and thoughts behind the images are greatly appreciated, too.

-- LuAnne

Meet Chris Abdnour



Chris joined the Tuesday crew of volunteers on August 5th, and we are so glad to have him. Chris first visited Mepkin during the 2024 Creche Festival and was impressed with the Abbey's beauty. Then in June, he met Greg and Jill Ewell, both long-time volunteers at the Abbey. Not long afterwards he decided to join his new friends as a garden volunteer. Chris says, "giving back by volunteering is something I've always liked doing."

When asked how long he had been in the "Low Country," Chris replied that the area's nickname bothered him a little. In August 2024, he and his family began a multi-phased move from Tampa to Mt. Pleasant. When Hurricane Helene struck Florida in September 2024, his home in Tampa was flooded. So, he'd feel more comfortable if this area was known as the "High Country."

Chris is newly retired and is just beginning to explore the things he likes to do, which includes swimming and biking. In Tampa he crewed on various sailboats and is looking forward to finding "a boat in need of crew" here. He is also looking forward to finding a local pottery studio.

Chris's background is in electrical engineering. Before retiring, he "worked as a government civilian to procure and field military equipment." His wife, Nicole, is pastor at Mt. Pleasant Presbyterian Church, and they have three children attending Lucy Beckham High School.

The Beat Goes On: Mepkin's Crews Keep Up the Good Work



Linda, Gail, and Susan spent a morning weeding and raking in St. Clare.



Linda and Susan watered the new shrubs in the big pots in front of the store while Barb gave another pot a makeover.

The Beat (cont'd)



Before...



After. It took Gail and Jill three hours to remove the Cypress Vine and restore some order to the bed by the break room. Well done, Ladies!

The Beat (cont'd)



Barb freshened up the white pots at the store with Foxtail Fern and a fresh batch of Heuchera (Coral Bells).



She then transplanted the Sedge Grass she removed from the white pots at the store to a spot in St. Clare.

The Beat (cont'd)



Although hard to spot among the tall grasses and plants in the Labyrinth, I followed the sound of Lee's mower as he went about trimming the garden's walkways and managed to snap these photos before he disappeared again.

The Beat (cont'd).



A lot of fresh mulch has been loaded, hauled, dumped, and spread around the grounds in the last month. Craig provided this photo of Carolyn preparing to dump a fresh batch.



It can't always be all work and no play, so after a morning of work recently, volunteers gathered to celebrate Greg Ewell's birthday.

The Beat (cont'd).



For all you do, Greg, this slice is for you – much thanks!!!

Our Guest Volunteers



On a recent Saturday afternoon, Craig had the pleasure of working with a group from The Athanasius Center in Wilmington, NC. They helped with mulching and Craig hopes they make this a yearly retreat.



Earlier in the month, Craig's friends from Germany spent a day at Mepkin working along the rock river outside the library...

Guests (cont'd)



... and the family did a wonderful job tidying up the area.

Well-Manicured and Absolutely Magnificent



Thanks to all the volunteers and staff members who help to keep the great expanse of lawns and Luce Garden so beautifully maintained.

Manicured (cont'd)



Trimmed bushes, healthy lawns and fresh mulch enhance the beauty of Luce Garden.

Manicured (cont'd)



Freshly mulched crepe myrtles line the terraced garden...



...and look out over the sloping sides of the garden to the ponds below.

A Rose Is a Rose...But These Are Special!



Br. Juan's pink roses are in bloom next to Our Lady in the Cloister.



And Br. Joseph's rose bush blooms outside the maintenance shed.

Speaking of Brother Joseph

Garden volunteers who have been around for a long time are quite familiar with Br. Joseph. Sadly, those who came later only know him through the photograph below that is displayed on a wall in our breakroom. Those that had the privilege of meeting him were left with quite a lasting impression. One of those folks was Ursula Wells who describes him as a “true disciple of Christ, deeply spiritual, extremely kind, and totally selfless.”

Walter Joseph Szwedo was the son of Polish immigrants who was born in Chicago in 1927. He entered the monastic life at Gethsemani at the age of seventeen and it was there that he learned to farm. In 1952, he was sent to Mepkin to take over as farm boss -- a daunting challenge due to a lack of farm equipment and depleted soil. By the time Br. Joseph arrived, the very survival of the monastery depended on having a working farm.¹ A multi-skilled individual, Br. Joseph would oversee many of the Abbey’s major operations during his seventy years at Mepkin.²



In retirement, Br. Joseph loved to fashion rosary beads from berries and to act as the Abbey’s squirrel feeder.³

Br. Joseph (cont'd)



Here's a photo of Br. Joseph from January 2017. Although small in stature, by all accounts, he had a giant heart and a robust spirit.

Br. Joseph (cont'd)

Paul Wilkes, who wrote a book about the year he spent coming to Mepkin on monthly retreats, pointed to Br. Joseph as a perfect example of what stability means not only in the life of the Brothers, but in our own as well. In a poignant telling of an encounter with Br. Joseph, he described him wearing “the most beautiful belt I have ever seen.” The monk had received the belt when he was a novice. It was “cracked and worn and held together by a sinew of leather.” Wilkes believed Br. Joseph wore the belt as one might wear a “badge of courage.”⁴

1. Macdonald, Robert R., *Between the Marsh and the Skies: The Mepkin Abbey Story*. (Charleston: Evening Post Books, 2023), 54.
2. *Ibid.*, 55.
3. *Ibid.*, 56
4. Wilkes, Paul, *Beyond the Walls, Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Life*. (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 73.



Br. Joseph not only loved to feed the squirrels, he also kept a bird feeder, which more than likely fed a lot of squirrels, too.

By Special Arrangement

Special thanks to Ursula for providing photos of Fr. Gueric's flower arrangements displayed in the Church during the month of September.



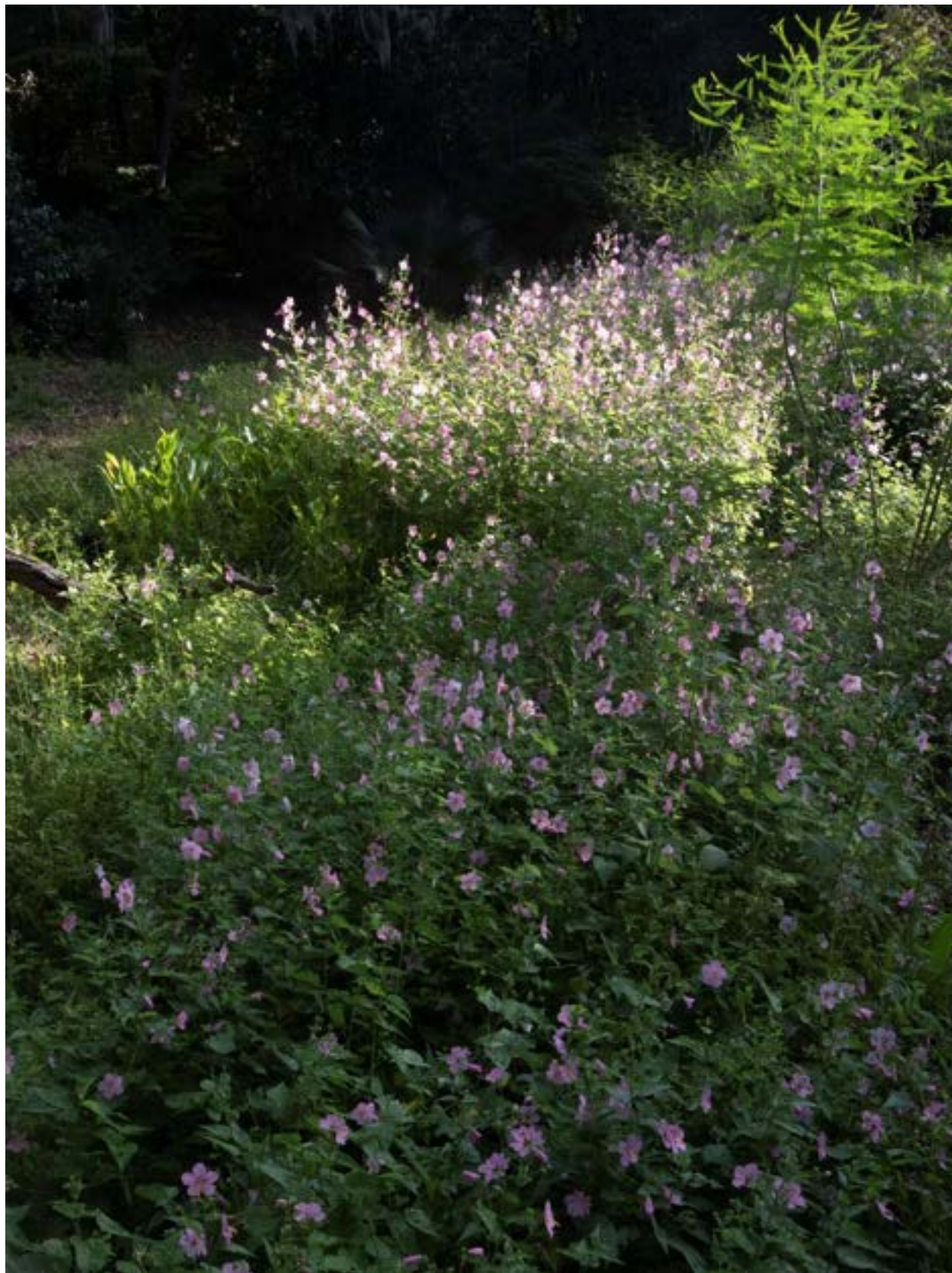
The flowers and leaves of a yucca plant come together so simply in this unusual arrangement on September 7th.

Arrangement (cont'd)



An arrangement of sunflowers likely stirred feelings of joy for those who attended church on September 14th. Symbolic of light and warmth, the sight of them usually evokes feelings of happiness.

Spotlight on the Seashore Mallow



Thanks to Paul Meyer for providing photos and research for our spotlight plant of the month, the beautiful Seashore Mallow.

Spotlight (cont'd)



Paul explained his encounter with the beautiful flowers as follows:

Sunday, on my morning walk across the meadows, I went down into the ravine between the Columbarium and the remembrance garden and saw these flowers in full bloom from the bridge. When I did my Google search, I was told they were Seashore Mallows. Hollyhocks and Rose of Sharon are in the same family.

Spotlight (cont'd)



Seashore Mallows are native to our area, and they like to grow in wet places. Thanks, Ursula, for this photo showing them growing near the bridge that crosses the ravine.

Mepkin's Hidden Wonders

Thanks to Paul, also, for the next three photos. He says that when he mows the fields to the right of the mushroom house, they bring him down a hill where there are two ponds. He said on a recent Tuesday he was mowing there and saw white objects floating in the water but wasn't able to make out what they were. A couple of days later, he returned to the site with his telephoto lens and discovered the objects were water lilies. He warns anyone who goes down to the pond to be very careful and watch your step. Otherwise, you may end up going for a swim.



Paul managed to “zoom in” on the water lilies and also captured a group of ducks swimming in the pond (see upper right corner).

Hidden (cont'd)



With the aid of a telephoto lens the viewer can almost reach out and touch these beautiful flowers.

Mepkin's Wild Things



Some of the most beautiful creatures on earth are butterflies. This one, a Gulf fritillary, was spotted in St. Bernard's garden.

Wild (cont'd)



Black swallowtails fluttered among the mallow flowers growing in the ravine and a hummingbird was heard darting about there, too.

Wild (cont'd)



*More spiders than usual seem to be present in the gardens this year.
This one hitched a ride on Barb's gator recently.*



Craig provided this photo of a timber rattlesnake taken by Peter Rundle at the hermitage located near the same pond where Paul spotted the water lilies. It's a stark reminder that much of Mepkin is still a very wild place and great caution should always be exercised.

Buckeyes, Anyone?

To some of us, the word “buckeye” is reminiscent of an extremely tasty peanut butter and chocolate treat we enjoy at holidays. So, it was really sweet to learn that there is a tree growing in the ravine by the Columbarium that is full of the nuts that inspired the confection.



Buckeyes (cont'd)



Thanks so much to Sylvia for leading me to this spot and giving me a hand with these photos.

Spotlight on the Guest House



Just inside the entrance to Mepkin sits a charming cottage, probably built in the late 1930s by Henry and Clare Boothe Luce, former owners of Mepkin Abbey. It originally served as their forest keeper's house, an occupation that sounds straight out of a fairy tale, but far more realistic considering that being in the timber business helped the Luce's financially maintain their idyllic winter wonderland.¹

In 1956, the house became the residence of Br. Conrad Greenia's parents, Herbert and Helen Greenia. Herbert was a skilled carpenter and became involved with many of the monastery's projects. Helen's excellent social skills were extremely helpful to the monks as well. She served as a hostess to the Abbey's guests, including the monks' visiting parents.²

Paul Wilkes, the writer whose account of Br. Joseph is included above, stayed here with his wife and two sons in the late 1990s.³ Most recently, the sculptor David Drake, Br. Lawrence's nephew, stayed in the cottage with his family while he restored one of his wood carvings. Attractively furnished and comfortable, it is likely to serve many more families for years to come.

1. Macdonald, Robert R., *Between the Marsh and the Skies: The Mepkin Abbey Story*. (Charleston: Evening Post Books, 2023), 66.

2. *Ibid.*, 66.

3. Wilkes, Paul, *Beyond the Walls, Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Life*. (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 148.

Once Upon a Time

Speaking of fairy tales, another little cottage once stood just inside the gates of Mepkin. Sometime around the year 1900, someone took a photograph of the tiny building and that image is now part of The Charleston Museum's photograph collection. I contacted the museum's chief curator recently for permission to include the photo in an issue of the newsletter and it is with her assistance and the consent of the museum that it appears below.

The architectural style of the building, Gothic Revival, was very popular from the 1840s to the 1880s.¹ Since Mepkin didn't pass out of the Laurens family until 1851, and there were four owners between them and J.W. Johnson, who purchased Mepkin in 1916,² it remains a question who built it and when.

1. McLester, Virginia & Lee, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1984) 197.

2. "Henry Laurens's Mepkin: Plantation to Abbey," *Carologue: A Publication of the South Carolina Historical Society*, Fall 2024, 22.



Courtesy of The Charleston Museum

Reflections

If there is anywhere on earth where reflection is likely to happen, it is at Mepkin. Thanks to Marianne Garner for contributing the next four photos along with some thoughts about the images.



Marianne says the little church that stands near the Labyrinth “speaks to her of days past” and wants to know if anyone knows its history.



She finds the Memorial Arbor a “tranquil, prayerful place” and feels she should make “a habit” of visiting there more often.

Reflections (cont'd)



She calls this photo “peaceful journey” and would have liked to have been on a bike herself to add to her enjoyment of the day.



She also wondered how many times she had “walked past this cross and never stopped to notice its beauty and to say a prayer.”

Contemplating the Month Ahead

October 2025 marks the 12th anniversary of the Garden Newsletter. The first edition appeared in October 2013 and was the brainchild of Dottie Roddy as is the Mepkin Abbey garden volunteer program. We are lucky to still have access to the newsletters she and others who followed in her footsteps have produced since then. Those earlier newsletters are an archival record of past events, most of them joyful, but a few that brought some heartache. They are a reminder, too, of those who were here before us, so it is always a treat for me to be able to include photos from a past newsletter in a newer edition to help us not forget.

If it's already October (yikes!), that means the Crèche Festival is just around the corner and the work to prepare for the event has already begun. Many of our garden volunteers step up to the plate to serve as volunteers for the Festival, and we thank them for pulling double duty.

And, finally, please remain mindful of your surroundings when you are on the grounds, especially if your duties or explorations take you into remote areas of the Abbey. Danger can lurk in even the most beautiful and the most unexpected of places.

