

Monastery gardens: From artichokes to “Zipperleinskraut” for aches and pains

In a region swept through by the storms of the Reformation and the Peasants' War, impressive sacred walls survived, but not much evidence of the daily life of the dissolved orders. Nevertheless, in present-day Saxony-Anhalt, remarkable monastery gardens thrive; some of them are among the state's "[Garden Dreams](#)". A quick visit to Michaelstein Monastery in Blankenburg.

At one corner of the cloister of Michaelstein Monastery, the portal stands wide open. As if the stone vault were continued by an avenue, it draws the eye out onto a green lawn path. Rose bushes and apple trees, lavender, and colorful wildflowers line the path. At the very end of this path, almost like the altar in a church, a light-colored wooden bench invites you to rest. From this bench, one can overlook almost the entire vegetable garden: the purple-flowering artichoke, blue cornflowers, pale pink sweet peas, black blackberries... Apples and elderberries are ripening. Today, the aromatic curry plant reigns supremely in its fragrance.

Explorations with Brother Grabolin

It's quiet. Until a school class floods into beds. The children search for the information boards, where they meet Brother Grabolin, the mole mascot. This curious group is led by Sabine Volk, the cultural education and monastery gardens officer at Michaelstein, which is now part of the Saxony-Anhalt Cultural Foundation. The [monastery's event schedule](#) – and not just for children – includes plenty of music, explorations, and workshops in the garden, for example, the Garden Evening Tour, the Garden Seminar, the Garden Sunday Tour, or the Harz Family Festival with its colorful market in August. As one of the last events of the season, the autumn EssBAR opens on October 9, 2025, on the so-called "Wise Thursday."

Meanwhile, the children have populated the herb garden. Here, too, they can touch, smell, and taste. What's more: They voluntarily wash their hands, because what's more exciting than watching the soapwort leaves foam green?

Planted Contemporary History

The fact that the vegetable and herb garden almost looks like it did in the days of the Cistercians who lived here until 1542 is the work of Sabine Volk. Like her predecessor, pharmaceutical engineer Hilde Thoms, she rummages through archives – always on the lookout for historical plans, plant lists, and recipes. "The old writings, including those about Michaelstein, contain information about the orders' efforts to live self-sufficiently through their own cultivation. We are displaying some of these documents in our exhibition on monastery gardens. But sometimes the stories break off, or the character of the grounds changes with the departure of the nuns and monks. In this respect, one always must consciously decide which century to revive. I usually focus on the era before the discovery of America; so, for example, there are no tomatoes or potatoes here, but parsnips, oat root, monk's spinach, spelt, einkorn wheat, emmer, and buckwheat." However, the expert admits that she sometimes makes exceptions, for example, with plants that are only mentioned later in the chronicles, but whose names tell exciting stories. For example, the ham root, better known as evening primrose, was said to have been used as a filling food even before the potato. Or the sedum herb, better known as the dreaded ground elder. And because the Duke of Brunswick once ruled the local lands after the dissolution of the order, a few cabbage varieties reminiscent of him are also allowed to grow.

Working - almost like the monks once did

The daily gardening routine of Sabine Volk and her three-person garden team is also almost historically influenced. While they do have metal tools and a modern spray hose, the blessings of modern gardening are otherwise dispensed with. Because no chemical pesticides are used, it can happen that a variety disappears completely. And instead of fertilizer from a bag, homemade manure is added to the soil. "However," says the garden manager, "that we can't always start the fight against the grass among the crops in time." To go back centuries and procure historically appropriate herbs, perennials, and trees, Sabine Volk often doesn't have to travel far. In the gene bank of the Leibniz Institute of Plant Genetics and Crop Plant Research (IPK) in Gatersleben, she usually finds what she's looking for: seeds or even plants that were already used in medieval monastery gardens. Of course, many have survived to the present day without gene banks, such as artichokes, strawberry spinach, and asparagus peas. But some were virtually forgotten and only returned through research and the revival of monastery gardens.

Gardens also on the "Romanesque Route": Drübeck and Jerichow

Also located in the northern Harz foothills and ennobled as a "Garden Dream," the monastery gardens of the former Benedictine nuns and canonesses invite you to [Drübeck](#). A rose garden, a kitchen garden, and the canoness gardens have been restored to greenery and bloom, based on the historical plan. Incidentally, travelers encounter the more than thousand-year-old monastery complex – like Michaelstein – on the "Romanesque Route." Those traveling along this tourist route through Saxony-Anhalt will also

encounter [Jerichow Monastery](#) in the Jerichow region. Its monastery garden is not thriving as a historical site in its original location, which is why it does not appear among the "Garden Dreams." However, it is modeled after medieval models. Medicinal herbs, dye plants, vegetables, and fruit, mentioned in ancient writings, grow in beds and remote orchards. And those who want to relax and enjoy the blooms, scents, and buzzing can take a seat in the garden's café.

Crucial question: How do you feel about herbs and vegetables?

The only question left is to ask Sabine Volk: How does she feel about herbs and vegetables? "Before I go to the pharmacy, I always look in the garden first. Sage and thyme are my companions during cold season. And I've become an avid connoisseur of edible flowers."

Author: Marlis Heinz, Photos: Volkmar Heinz

Additional assets available online: [Photos \(2\)](#)

<https://press.invest-in-saxony-anhalt.com/2025-10-16-Monastery-gardens-From-artichokes-to-Zipperleinskraut-for-aches-and-pains>