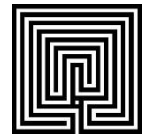


# The Arboretum Labyrinth at JMU

Pat Kennedy, Dennis Whetzel & Ron Nelson



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James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, U.S.A., now has a labyrinth in its arboretum - thanks to the dedication and hard work of several people and to the generosity of Robert Frazier of Frazier Quarry, who donated the limestone for the job. The labyrinth is situated in a spot that was formerly dead and dying trees, cleared by Ron Brown and Dennis Whetzel. Nestled within dense forest, it is a pleasant surprise to those who chance upon it as they walk or jog along the nature trail. This article will address three aspects of JMU's arboretum labyrinth, written by those responsible for the layout of the labyrinth, its embellishment with medieval plants, shrubs, and trees, and the current and future use of the labyrinth.

## Laying Out the Labyrinth

Pat Kennedy (Dance Instructor)

A rope swings an arc across a nearly flat piece of land in the JMU arboretum. My husband, Vic, and I position and re-position the rope around the numerous trees that fall within its path. The rope is 32 feet long, yellow tape marks every 3 feet 8 inches, except at the beginning, which measures 5 feet 4 inches before the first yellow marking appears. The larger beginning space will create an extra-large center; the other measurements are intended to preserve the 2:9 ratio found in the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth. Small orange flags on two-foot metal poles are placed into the ground where the tape marks indicate. The earth does not readily yield to the invasion of the flags: a drought has made the ground hard. After two hours, hundreds of orange flags float above the earth in a confusing pattern. It is difficult to see where the paths should be. We decide to lay down rope, using the flags as a guide - only to discover a misplacement of several rows of flags. Measured again with the rope, the misplaced flags soon find their proper locations. The pattern finally takes on the shape of a labyrinth. Walking the rope labyrinth, we tie ribbons around some trees that are too dangerous to leave, due to disease or location. These will be cut down.

All this work was preceded by numerous visits to the site to determine the exact location and position of the labyrinth. Two cottonwood trees, the only ones in the arboretum, stand tall observing us. Dennis suggests they be in the center of the labyrinth. Everyone immediately agrees. We walk around the site, viewing the cottonwoods from various angles as we discuss placement of the opening. All agree that the entrance should not be right next to the walking path. People need to make a conscious choice to walk the labyrinth, not just stumble into it. As we continue our circular walk around the site, keeping the cottonwoods as our focal point, we realize we have "turned our backs" to the main road that runs next to the arboretum. Although vehicles are hidden from view, traffic sounds float into our conscious minds. Viewing the cottonwoods from this perspective, we have literally turned our backs to everyday reality, the hectic and chaotic pace that often characterizes our daily existence. This will be the entrance to the labyrinth.

Two months and several trips to the quarry pass before we resume our work on the labyrinth. We are surprised to see the flags still standing when we return to our labor of love. Two large piles of crushed limestone sit unceremoniously, one near the entrance of the labyrinth, the other near the walking path. A pile of 4-6" stones (riprap) rests as companions to the gravel. The task of spreading the several tons of stone seems daunting. Three wheelbarrows, four shovels, two rakes, three adolescents and several adults join forces over several weeks to meet this Herculean task. As the rope marking the circuits disappears under the gravel, small rocks replace it. Using the yellow-taped rope, we check the measurements again.

Over the course of a month we squeeze time from our everyday lives to line the paths with rocks. The original intention is to use two 4-inch-wide rocks side by side; along with 36-inch paths of crushed limestone, this keeps the integrity of the 2:9 ratio. The two-rock barrier is dwarfed by the sheer size of the labyrinth, which has a diameter of 60 feet. Another pile of larger rocks is donated, but there is not enough for the entire labyrinth. We decide to use the large rocks to surround the center. This pile also yields two very large rocks to mark the entrance of the labyrinth and four medium-sized stones to mark the four cardinal directions.

The use of the larger rocks provides the freedom to be generous with the four-inch stones. Instead of two stones side by side, we pile rocks on top of each other, creating a slightly bulkier barrier all around. Our rope-measuring tool is in constant use, checking and re-checking the placement of the stones. The last rocks slide into place and the labyrinth is complete. The two large boulders marking the entrance of the labyrinth are ready to welcome all who enter. There is discussion about whether to mulch the paths. We change our minds several times, finally deciding that the monochromatic grey gives the recently built labyrinth an admirably ancient look. Nature will provide the mulch as the labyrinth matures and greets each season.

With compass in hand, Vic heads to the arboretum. Summer has given way to fall, and we are preparing for the official dedication and placement of the directional stones into the labyrinth. Vic will use the compass to mark where the stones will go and move them near their locations so they can be rolled into place during the ceremony. As I search for appropriate readings for the dedication, the phone rings. Breathlessly, Vic says, "Guess where the north is?" Not waiting for a reply, he continues, "Dead center in the entrance." When we share this information with the other labyrinth builders, we take this as an affirmation that we made the right decision.

### **Embellishing the Labyrinth**

Dennis Whetzel (Director of the Arboretum)

A number of factors were taken into consideration in choosing plant material to enhance the labyrinth. First, the physical conditions of the site itself presented a challenge. The site is located within a deciduous oak-hickory forest. High shade and the lack of a supplemental water source were limiting factors, so plants likely to survive in that environment were selected. Second, with these environmental restrictions in mind, plants of ancient origin that have had significant historical, ethnobotanical, and cultural associations were chosen. Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), an ancient plant mentioned by the Roman historian, Pliny, in the first century A.D. as a comforting and soothing herb for weary travelers, has been planted, symbolically, near the entrance/exit to the labyrinth. Then there is betony (*Stachys officinalis*), an herb known to the ancient Greeks and praised by Antonius Musa, chief physician to the Roman emperor Augustus, in the third century AD, as being a panacea for at least 47 different diseases. It became endowed through the ages with powers against evil spirits.

A number of plants held sacred by the ancient Celtic druids of Britain have also been planted, including vervain (*Verbena officinalis*), used in concocting their ceremonial lustral waters, meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), monkshood (*Aconitum napellus*), primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), and pasqueflower (*Anemone pulsatilla*). Moreover, other ancient plants such as setterwort (*Helleborus foetidus*), self-heal (*Prunella vulgaris*), lungwort (*Pulmonaria officinalis*), belladonna (*Atropa belladonna*), herb bennet (*Geum urbanum*), sowbread (*Cyclamen hederifolium*), lady's mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris*), king's-spear (*Asphodeline lutea*), herb-of-grace (*Ruta graveolens*), and sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*) have been planted in the borders surrounding the labyrinth proper. In addition, native and naturalized shrubs and trees have been incorporated, primarily for screening purposes and for providing year-round aesthetic appeal, as well as food for wildlife. A common shrub, privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*), has become naturalized in the surrounding arboretum woods. Originally from Europe, this semi-evergreen shrub provides partial screening for the labyrinth as well as black, berry-like fruit for birds.

Evergreens such as Norway spruce (*Picea abies*), eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*), and English yew (*Taxus baccata*) add important colors and textures for winter. Other shrubs that produce berry-like fruit, such as beautyberry (*Callicarpa japonica*), aronia (*Aronia arbutifolia*) and the deciduous holly (*Ilex x verticillata* 'Sparkleberry') have been included. A special tree, the rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), with its clusters of bright orange-colored pomes and long revered as a magical tree in Europe, has been planted near the entrance to the labyrinth to welcome pilgrims on their journey through the labyrinth.

## Using the Labyrinth

Ron Nelson (Professor of English)

In addition to the frequent use of the labyrinth by passers-by on the nature trail, Sunday school classes have met there, and part of the Sacred Arts Festival for the JMU community and the community at large took place there. These activities reinforce our regard for the labyrinth as a sacred space. Moreover, the JMU Animal Rights Coalition met at the labyrinth for an inspirational walk.

The chief classroom use to date has been in my sections of General Humanities (GHUM) 200: Great Works: The Labyrinth. Students read Helen Curry's *The Way of the Labyrinth*, W.H. Matthews' *Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and Development*, essays from the special issue of *Parabola* devoted to the labyrinth (Volume 17, No.2, Summer 1992), as well as poems, short stories, plays, and novels based on labyrinths and labyrinthine situations. They find themselves immersed in the literature. But students need first-hand experience in walking a labyrinth, so a major requirement of the course is a field trip report, in which students record their experience in walking the arboretum labyrinth. For almost all the students, it is their first walk through a labyrinth. I try to reinforce the readings, especially from Curry, in suggesting that there is no one right way to walk a labyrinth, that a person should go at one's own pace, and that one should not expect miracles but may well expect subtle change to occur.

When they arrive at the labyrinth, many of the students react as I did in my initial labyrinth walk: they wonder what they are doing there. After the momentary confusion, they seem to realize that they have a project to do and so proceed with business. Many students report that they find their walking pace slows as they proceed, one of the results of the turns from circuit to circuit. They spend varying amounts of time in the center, depending on what they have on their minds. Often the students find that the way out goes quicker than the way into the center.

Students frequently take roommates or friends with them - a practice that seems to relieve the pressure for them. Although sometimes the other persons are distractions, they often ease matters. And the walk becomes, in a way, a bonding activity. If the walk is not as successful as it might have been, the students know that they can go back later to walk it again. I encourage students also to walk a second labyrinth in town (to the rear of Pat Kennedy's house) or to walk a maze for the purpose of comparison-contrast. This exercise broadens their perspectives by increasing their awareness of the differences between labyrinths or the differences between labyrinths and mazes.

I have been called upon to lecture on labyrinths in other classes, like graduate courses in psychology, and to deliver lunch-hour talks on campus. Newspaper articles have appeared in local papers, and the word is getting out that a labyrinth is available for all to use. Although it is technically a work-in-progress--we will soon be putting in benches and identifying, directional, and instructional signs--the labyrinth itself invites the JMU community, the local community, and other pilgrims to derive benefits from it and will continue to do so, I suspect, long into perpetuity.

Over the coming months, I will explore with others how the potential of the arboretum labyrinth might be actualized in classroom and real-world situations. For example, psychology students might benefit from the introspection that the labyrinth nurtures. Conflict resolution exercises might be developed for psychology and human resources students. Mathematics students might find great pleasure in learning about the sacred geometry that informs the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral and to an extent at the

arboretum labyrinth. Health science students might explore the healing value of labyrinths as already found in various hospitals. Students of criminology might delve into the already discovered value of labyrinths in prisons. Art and design students might delight in the aesthetic qualities of our labyrinth and others, comparing and contrasting their beauties. Students of history and cultural diversity might find fascinating the labyrinths through the ages and cultures. Childhood education students could expose young people to the pleasures and mysteries of labyrinths and mazes, giving some important early experience to them. And people concerned with local matters and problems might seek answers, using the calming, reassuring qualities that they are likely to find in walking the arboretum labyrinth.

Finally, we feel fortunate to have been given the opportunity to work together in constructing a lovely labyrinth in the arboretum. I would be remiss if I failed to mention that, on a day with the sun shining through the leaves of the tall trees, dappling the sacred ground with its radiance, there are few sights in this often-chaotic world so refreshingly beautiful. We trust that others over the years will discover the satisfactions that we have been lucky enough to experience and so become linked with those through the ages who have found gratification as a result of aligning themselves with this ancient instrument.

Pat Kennedy, Dennis Whetzel & Ron Nelson,  
JMU, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA; November 2002



***The labyrinth at JMU, Harrisonburg, Virginia. Photo: Ron Nelson.***

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