

WHY A GARDEN?

*By a garden is meant mystically a place of spiritual repose,
stillness, peace, refreshment, delight.*

— JOHN HENRY CARDINAL NEWMAN

Gardens have long been associated with peace, tranquility, spirituality, and solace. They soothe the senses and allow for introspection, contemplation, and meditation. In a garden we feel closer to nature and, for a few precious moments, aware of something greater than ourselves. The mind is gently turned from thoughts and pressures of daily life.

Traditionally gardens have been constructed for contemplation or quiet enjoyment, but usually for one person or one class of people. Kings, popes, and the well-to-do have built gardens for private repose and tranquility. Minimalist Japanese Zen gardens are designed for meditation, neighborhood key gardens as a refuge from a bustling metropolis, and vast estate gardens for freedom and escape from court life.

Each type of garden says something about the owner, and each design affects the visitor in a different way. The following examples of some well-known gardens give us a clue to human-kind's relationship with gardens.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

God Almighty first planted a garden.

— FRANCIS BACON, 1561–1626

Eden is the archetypal garden, that paradise of all paradises and mother of all gardens.

In the Bible and in countless stories, endlessly embellished, Eden is described as a beautiful garden, filled with all types of animals, fruits, plants, flowers, and trees imaginable. The temperature is always perfect, the grass is always green, the water always fresh and flowing, and the man and woman who inhabit the garden are initially perfect, unblemished, and chaste. But man challenges God's omnipotence and Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden.

The Garden of Eden has been shaped in our minds as the perfect paradise, a place longed for, a personal garden of escape. We compare the world's beautiful gardens to this mystical, ephemeral place that may be present only in our imaginations and certainly holds different meanings for each one of us.

If Eden represents a place where God can be found, then its loss represents a separation from God, regression towards our baser, animalistic tendencies. Reconnection with the garden is our collective dream.

THE HANGING GARDENS OF BABYLON

Bread feeds the body, indeed, but flowers feed also the soul.

— THE QUR'ÁN

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, were located in ancient Babylon, 50 km (31 miles) south of present-day Baghdad, Iraq. Babylon means “the gate of the god.”

They were built by Nebuchadnezzar, a successful warrior king who took the throne in 605 BCE. He conquered all the territory surrounding Babylon except mountainous Medes, with which he forged a peaceful alliance by marrying Princess Amytis.

Wanting his new wife to be happy, Nebuchadnezzar built her a mountain to remind her of home. His slaves erected a series of brick arches, each 10 stories high, to form a shaded courtyard. Brick terraces were then built on top and planted with trees and plants from every corner of the kingdom. The structure was massive — 122 meters square (400 feet square) and 23 meters (75 feet) high. The gardens were irrigated by a chain pump, operated by slaves, which brought water up from the Euphrates River.

The gardens did not actually ‘hang’ in the sense of being suspended. The name comes from an inexact translation of the Greek word “kremastos” or the Latin word “pensilis,” which means not just “hanging” but “overhanging,” like a terrace or balcony. Some believe these magnificent gardens are only a myth, the creation of Greek poets and historians.

VERSAILLES

Show me your garden and I shall tell you what you are.

— ALFRED AUSTIN, 1835–1913

If a garden is an outward reflection of the owner’s character and purpose, then Versailles perfectly describes a monarch who compared himself to Apollo, god of intellect. These gardens originally covered an area of 8,000 hectares (20,000 acres) and were surrounded by a 43-kilometer (29-mile) long wall with 22 gates.

Louis XIV, the “Sun King,” commissioned André Le Nôtre, an expert in botany, architecture, and painting, to design these vast gardens, which were laid out between 1660 and 1670.

The king was fascinated by his gardens and constantly altered them. Flowerbeds were changed on a continuous basis—some even every day. Statues in marble and bronze and exquisite fountains were placed throughout the grounds.

The combination of geometric design and the rational, planned, and intricate use of color give the impression that these are “gardens of intelligence.”

Versailles and its magnificent gardens became the focal center of French public life—social, cultural, and political. The effect was to provide powerful reinforcement for the centralizing authority of the monarchy.

THE VATICAN GARDENS

*I think that if ever a mortal heard the voice of God
it would be in a garden at the cool of the day.*

— F. FRANKFORT MOORE

In the mid-ninth century Pope Leo IV decided to build walls around a 23.5-hectare (58-acre), largely uncultivated, marshy area on one of Rome's seven hills. It may have been the possibility of having a protected, cultivated garden that drew the pope to build his residence at the Vatican, the site of St. Peter's martyrdom and burial.

The formal gardens were not conceived until 1447 under Pope Nicholas V, when they were built both for papal court ceremonies and for the pope's personal enjoyment. Pope Innocent VIII took long walks in the gardens, in which a small lodge was built where he could rest. Later, additional rooms were added to allow for longer stays.

The design of the Vatican gardens—the only place where the pope can take exercise in the open air, in private—has been modified by subsequent popes to suit their purposes or tastes.

JAPANESE GARDENS

Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact.

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON

A Japanese garden imitates nature; it does not seek to conquer or destroy it. The aesthetic characteristics of Japanese gardens and landscape design relate to Buddhist and Shinto elements of beauty: appreciation of age, impermanence, imperfection, perishability, simplicity, irregularity, incompleteness, understatement, and mystery.

Japanese gardens represent geography on a large scale that has been shrunk to human proportions. Sensory qualities of nature are compressed into a small space, usually under a few hectares (8 acres) of land. Because of the constraint of space, they are extremely intricate, complex gardens that encourage a slow perusal of each significant element.

Subtle color is part of the allure, as the muted greens, greys, and browns—colors associated with earth's basic elements—draw one closer to the intended purpose of the garden: that the visitor should feel at one with nature.

There are two basic garden styles: Tsukiyama, with small hills and stones representing mountains, and ponds representing oceans and lakes; and Karesansui, or dry garden style, with white sand representing the ocean and stones representing hills or even sea-going vessels. Zen Buddhism strongly influenced the Karesansui garden style.

In stroll gardens, the small size encourages contemplation rather than physical exercise. Paths wind and curve to hide and reveal, and at no point do four paths ever intersect.

In dry landscape (Zen) gardens, there are no flowers, lawns, or borders. The landscape picture of movement and stillness is created by raked patterns of gravel and the careful selection and placement of stone compositions that invite contemplation and peaceful and meditative thought.

KEY GARDENS

The best place to find God is in a garden. You can dig for him there.

— GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Key gardens are usually located in the center of a city square surrounded by residential flats. The gardens are owned and tended by the residents, who hold keys to the garden so they may enter at any time to enjoy a green space in an otherwise concrete jungle.

THE BAHÁ'Í GARDENS

Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator.

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

Most formal gardens in the world are either not open to the public or they charge admission. The Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb are privately owned gardens that are open to the public free of charge. Donations are not sought from visitors. Construction was entirely financed by voluntary donations from Bahá'ís of all income levels and classes, from all parts of the globe.

With their lush foliage from different parts of the world and innovative irrigation, they are sometimes compared to Babylon's hanging gardens, but the Terraces stand on their own as a gift to humanity, built through sacrifice and love for God. Their beauty uplifts the spirit and points to a united and peaceful future for all humanity.

The Terraces are an oasis in the city of Haifa, a little bit of paradise among high-rise buildings and shops. With the gardens' centerpiece, the gold-domed Shrine, always visible, the straight, wide paths and ordered landscape encourage contemplation by freeing visitors from thinking about the physical path and allowing them to concentrate on personal thoughts.

As the approach to a sacred place, the Terraces are treated with as much reverence as the Shrine they embrace. Their structure reflects the purpose of the Bahá'í Faith: to transform the hearts of the people of the world and create a united global community while celebrating our diversity.

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