



Landscape Symphonies

An Enclosed Paradise: Islamic Gardens



Traditionally, an Islamic garden was a cool place of rest and reflection, a reminder of paradise. Generally, they emphasized the beauty and importance of water and shade. This is not too surprising since Islam came from and generally spread in a hot and arid climate, which we Central Californians well relate to as we head into the hottest time of our year. The enchantment with greenery and the description of the gardens of paradise in the Koran led to a penchant among Arab rulers to collect plants for their kitchen gardens.

The kitchen garden was not only a garden supplying food but natural beauty as well and it gave rise to a genre of Arabic poetry known as the *rawdiya*, the garden poem, meant to conjure the image of the Garden of Paradise.

Emblematic Islamic gardens, such as the Taj Mahal in India and the Alhambra in Spain, while stunning, don't reflect the garden's use at many levels of society. Clifford A. Wright describes the variety of Islamic gardens, "The Islamic garden was quite different than the gardens of Europe that became famous during the Renaissance. Muslims had different kinds of gardens serving different purposes." After the Arab invasions of the 7th century CE, the traditional design of the Persian garden was integrated into use with the Islamic garden. Persian gardens after that time were traditionally enclosed spaces, called by them 'pairi-daeza.' In the Charbagh, or paradise garden, four water canals typically carry water into a central pool or fountain, interpreted as the four rivers in paradise, filled with milk, honey, wine and water. Hellenistic influences are also apparent; the Western use of straight lines in the plan is blended with Sassanid ornamental plantations and fountains.

What might account for this interest in and love of growing plants among Muslim communities? Can the philosophical beginning of the Arab agricultural initiative be found in the conception of man derived from the holy book of the Muslims, the Koran? The Koran is not a record of the Prophet's activities, like the New Testament is of Jesus, but is believed to be the actual Word of God. The Koran provides thorough and comprehensive guidelines on everything from diet to commercial law. Traditional Islamic architecture is primarily concerned with enclosed space defined by its building materials. The Islamic aesthetic sees the quality of the volume, its light, its coolness, and its decoration as more important than the mass. The result is an internal architecture, inseparable from the fabric of the city, that forges a refuge. This architectural concept of the Islamic dwelling and city is meant to mirror the ideal human condition, which should be disinterested in outward symbols and deeply concerned with space for the inner soul to breathe and develop. The garden should create this refuge both literally and figuratively.

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