

PARADISE GARDENS

SUMMARY OF THE TALK TO BANGALOW GARDEN CLUB BY DIANA HARDEN, APRIL 2025

The talk is based on Monty Don's 'Paradise Gardens' TV series and on Diana's travels to some of the locations mentioned.

DESCRIPTION AND MEANING

The Paradise Garden is formal, symmetrical, and most often enclosed. Traditionally it is rectangular, split into four quarters with a pond in the centre, a four-fold design called **CHAHAR BAGH** (four gardens) or **PARADISE ON EARTH**.

The four-fold layout was reinterpreted in Islamic terms by Muslim Arabs after 7th century conquest of Persia. Associated with the Abrahamic concept of paradise and the Garden of Eden. Genesis 2:10 reads 'And the river went out of Eden to water the garden: and from hence it was parted, and became into four heads'. Muhammad spoke of four rivers: of water, milk, wine and honey. 4 equal sections = 4 elements = 4 seasons

Symbols used in the Paradise Gardens include circular fountains representing heaven, square shapes representing earth. Rain was considered mercy from heaven as water essential for life. The overall design element is order, proportion and harmony

HISTORY

Paradise Gardens originated in Persia during the Achaemenid Empire (6th century BCE). The oldest Persian Garden belonged to Cyrus the Great in his capital Pasargadae, near Shiraz in present day Iran.

By the 13th century Paradise Gardens had spread throughout the Egypt and the Mediterranean, during the Muslim Arabic conquests and by as far as Spain, usually forts, palaces and estates, with courtyards, paths and fountains (the Alhambra being the most famous) and in the 16th century to India with Prince Babur the 1st Emperor of the Mughal Empire. The Mughal gardens have tombs/mausoleums or pavilions in the centre (with the Taj Mahal being the most famous). These gardens changed during the time of British colonial rule.

PARADISE GARDENS REFERENCED IN LITERATURE

Excerpts from 'There are Rivers in the Sky' by Elf Shafak, partly set in Nineveh (ancient Assyrian city of Upper Mesopotamia Eastern Bank of Tigris, 640s BCE

The King looked out onto 'lush perfumes gardens, bubbling fountains and irrigation canals.'

'Manicured estates, splendid aqueducts, imposing temples, thriving orchards, charming public parks, verdant fields etc'

'gardens brimming with blooming trees and aromatic plants – almond, date, ebony, fir, medlar, mulberry, olive, pear, plum, pomegranate, poplar, quince, rosewood, tamarisk, terebinth (source of turpentine and galls for use in tanning), walnut, willow.

'he and his grandfathers have turned this region into a paradise'

ELEMENTS OF PARADISE GARDENS

WATER

The main elements of paradise gardens are water, with ponds, canals, rills and fountains.

PLANTS – FRUIT AND SCENTED TREE AND SHRUBS

Scent is an important element with fruit-bearing trees and scented flowering trees and shrubs.

PLANTS USED HAVE SYMBOLIC AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

- Olive, fig, date and pomegranate – represent abundance, fertility and paradise
- Jasmine, rose and hibiscus – fragrant flowers valued for their beauty and scent
- Other plants like cardamon, pepper, turmeric, rosemary, papyrus reflected trade routes and cultural references of the regions these gardens were located
- Islamic Gardens – featured date palms, citrus trees, and other fruits and herbs mentioned in the Quran.

EXAMPLES OF PARADISE GARDENS

SPAIN, GRANADA - ALHAMBRA and GENERALIFE

The Alhambra is fortress, with a series of palaces with courtyards and gardens, built by successive rulers over 800 years of Islamic rule, Moors/Nasrids in Al Andaluz.

The courtyard gardens with water features are laid out in the Chahar Bagh layout.

The Generalife was built in the 13th CE as a Summer Palace. The square building with the circular internal courtyard is a later Christian building

The main elements are sunken gardens, with a scented meadow and water. Water is used to as reflection, a mirror to the sky. Water also had a cooling effect. Galleries and arbours are frequently used to filter views out through screens in galleries, and frame views into courtyards.

Most famous of the courtyards is the Court of the Lions , with a basin surrounded by lions. The galleries surrounding the courtyard with its many columns provide shade. The columns represent palm trees (as in oasis)

The walls and interiors are decorated with coloured tile work, plaster work (once coloured) include floral and geometric motifs.

SPAIN - SEVILLE

The Arabs brought oranges to Spain. The Seville streets lined with orange trees and in courtyard of Seville Cathedral.

REAL ALCAZAR – Royal Palace 10th CE by Moors.14th CE

Pedro 1 of Castille built the Mudejar Palace. The architecture and gardens combine Islamic and Christian design elements. Much of the original building and gardens have been maintained.

The gardens feature Citrus trees in sunken gardens , which provides a cool green.

Plants used include date palms, pomegranate, rosemary and bay and scented fruits and herbs as mentioned in the Koran. The elements of scent and water is the archetypal heavenly garden

MOROCCO – THE MOORS WERE EXPELLED TO MOROCCO

MARRAKESH

AGDAL PALACE

Marrakesh is known as the City of Gardens. An early example is the Agdal Palace, described by Monty Don as a walled meadow. It is on a huge scale at 400 hectares in size.

Water again is the key element, which is piped from Atlas Mountains.

LE JARDIN SECRET

This riad garden has a new planting scheme, designed by UK based Tom Stuart-Smith.

Visitors enter by a gate, from the noisy Medina. There are two separate riad gardens, one surrounding a 16th century palace, qubba (tomb) and tower. Elements of the garden include paths and water. The planting in of the gardens includes Olives, Rosemary, Society Garlic and weeping grasses, in other words a simple fragrant meadow. Other plants include Olive, pomegranate, fig, date, argan trees, grapevine and oranges.

The other garden has a Christian twist using exotic plants from around the world, including Aloes, Opuntia (prickly Pear), Kalanchoes, Agave, Bromeliads, Yucca, palms, Euphorbias, Pachypodium, Limonium, Jacaranda

TURKEY

ISTANBUL - where the east meets west –

Byzantium Empire overthrown in 1453 by the Ottomans and the Muslim era began. Name of city changed to Constantinople. The Ottomans revered tulips. There are over 2,000 types of tulips, with the original species having long, thin petals

TOPKAPI PALACE – Royal House and Government Offices.

Again, we see a series of courtyards. Everybody was allowed into the first courtyard, then the courtyards became progressively more private.

Wall decorated with Iznik tiles, which look like carpets. Tile motifs include flowers and plants such as tulips, pomegranates and carnations.

The buildings resemble stone kiosks , semi open structures, bandstands, pavilions, which Monty Don thought are like marble tents. The pavilions look out (over the Bosphorus) rather than in, to embrace the natural environment.

IRAN (PERSIA)

ISFAHAN

Diana showed images from the Internet of three adjoining squares, palaces and gardens in the centre of Isfahan. These are:

NAGHASI JAHAN SQUARE, a huge square with mosque on one side and mercantile on the other side.

CHEHEL SOTOUN, a 17th CE pleasure garden, with 40 columns to show power, 20 of which are reflected in rectangular pool. Chehel Sotoun is used for festival and ceremony. Plants include plane trees for shade, poplar, elms and fruit trees.

And **HESHT BEHESHT**, a public gardens built in 1870.

INDIA - typically FORTS AND TOMB GARDENS from the Mughal empire (Islamic)

NEW DELHI

HUMAYANS TOMB - 16th CE is the tomb of the 2nd Mughal emperor, son of Babur founder of Mughal Empire. Tomb gardens important because showed reverence for the dead but a place used by the living.

Again, you see a grid layout with rills and ponds. The gardens used to be sunken with flowering plants. The square platforms were used for tents, now planted with trees (by British). Diana found an article about a restoration project where the trees will be removed and close to original planting restored. It was/is a place for government, socialising, gathering, business, where people lived, ate and slept, a tented city, filled with life.

Original plants included Harsingar, Hibiscus, Arabian Jasmine, Pomegranate, Orange, Lemon, Neem, Mango, Lilies, Tulips, Daffodils, Cypress.

JAIPUR

AMBER FORT (and palace)

Again, there are a series of courtyards, progressively getting more private. The walls decorated with floral motifs. We see sunken gardens with in geometric designs, a Rajput and Mughal, a merging of Islamic and Hindu cultures. The diagonals in the garden layout are a Hindu reference.

Down beside the river is the Kesar Kyarai called saffron Garden even though saffron doesn't grow here. The woman from the harem looked down upon this garden.

AGRA

TAJ MAHAL – TOMB GARDEN 1631 built by Shah Jahan as a tomb for beloved wife Muntaz Mahal

A series of courtyards with the famous long pond flanked by pencil pines. The Taj is flanked by two red sandstone buildings (one a mosque and the other a guest/meeting house). The garden across the river is called the Mehtab Bagh or Moonlight garden, and is part of the whole. Plants in Mehtab Bagh include guava, maulshri, Nerium oleander, hibiscus, citrus, neem, bauhinia, Ashoka, and jamun. A black Taj was proposed by Shah Jahan for his own tomb, but Jahan's son abandoned the idea due to cost.

The gardens and trees are much changed from the original. The trees are a later addition by the British. The trees obscure the view. When British arrived, it was a tangle of bushes and trees. Lord Curzon changed it to lawns and trees.

The white marble of the Taj Mahal is decorated with inlay marble called Pietra Dura, with floral motifs.

AGRA FORT 16th CE Here we see a carpet garden and marble inlay with floral motifs. Dahlias are common flowers today. The walls are decorated with floral motifs

EGYPT

CAIRO – A NEW PARK

A modern version of a Paradise Garden, the Al-Azhar Park, built on the site of a garbage dump, was opened in 2005

OTHER EXAMPLES INCLUDE

KASHMIR, SRINAGAR – SHALIMAR BAGH, NISHAT BAGH

PAKISTAN, LAHORE JAHANGAR TOMB GARDEN