

JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE GARDEN

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A painting depicting an Egyptian garden in the Tomb of Nebamun (Eighteenth Dynasty).

If we pause to contemplate not simply the beauty and form of a domestic garden, but its elemental “beingness,” we see that its inner life is rich and significant. The concept of a garden has evolved, not only alongside humanity, but also within our consciousness from the earliest foundations of civilization.

As an archetype, the garden represents the Soul, its qualities of abundance, joy, innocence, peace, and order. The garden in its most refined expression represents an expansion of consciousness. In an untended, neglected state, the garden mirrors a consciousness of dormancy and stagnation.

By examining the history of gardens in their various expressions of form and function, we get clues, not only of their effect upon our collective evolution of consciousness, but how we may each nurture our own “Inner Garden.”

The evolution of the garden began when humans fenced outside spaces with

the intention of keeping something, such as animals, either in, or out. The earliest manifestation of the garden was purely functional, consisting of easily erected and deconstructed fencing to accommodate a semi-nomadic lifestyle. Around 10,000 years ago, agriculture allowed civilizations to blossom, and people began creating walled spaces.

Particularly in Iran, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Levant,¹ gardens became more elaborate. Here, affluent individuals built and planted decorative gardens, not only for practicality, but also as beautiful esthetic spaces.

Sixteenth-century BCE Egyptian paintings record some of the earliest known pleasure gardens, although it's very likely such gardens predate this period. Perhaps enclosed gardens originated in desert climes as retreats from the heat and searing brilliance of the desert sun – private oases of serenity and beauty.

From the Middle East, into Greece, Rome, France, Italy, and across to the

British Isles, gardens became necessary embellishments to the estates of wealthy citizens and colonizers alike. Lush gardens, ornate statuary, and magnificent water features became emblems of status. Additionally, the garden began to incorporate symbolic and religious components, in addition to its sensory delights.

Whether emulating an oasis, displaying a homeowner's status, or creating an earthly paradise, private gardens became places to make offerings to deities, to pray and meditate, and perchance, to experience mystical ecstasy.

Before long, the middle classes began to create garden retreats of their own, albeit less imposing. Eventually, some communities conceptualized the idea of public gardens to beautify their municipalities and to edify their populace.

Persian Paradise Gardens

In monochromatic, waterless places surrounded by shifting dunes and craggy precipices, it's reasonable to conclude that people idealized the afterlife as a beautiful garden. Thus, Paradise became the blueprint for private and public gardens in what is now Iran.

O self at rest and at peace, return to your Lord, well-pleasing and well-pleased! Enter among My servants! Enter My Garden.

- Surat al-Fajr, 27-30, Qur'an

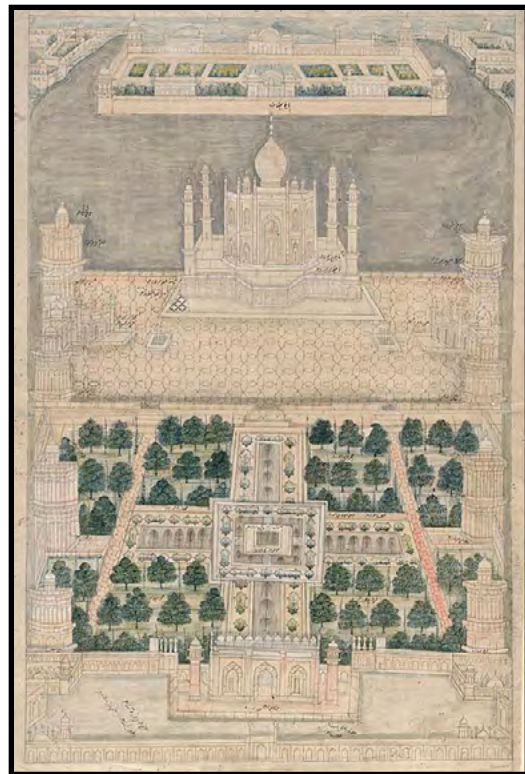
Ideally, the Persian paradise garden is formal and symmetrical in design. Traditionally, it's divided into four quarters. The quarters are planted with trees for shade and fruit, with herbs and fragrant flowers to perfume the space, inviting bees to linger, building hives dripping with sweet, golden honey. No religious images or statuary distract from the serenity, purity, and purpose of these gardens.

Water – in the form of a pool or fountain – held an important place at the garden's center. Sometimes narrow channels would carry water into the four quarters, echoing the architecture of Allah's Paradise as described in the Qur'an.

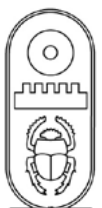
Allah has promised the men and women of the believers' Gardens with rivers flowing under them, remaining in them timelessly, forever, and fine dwellings in the Gardens of Eden. And Allah's good pleasure is even greater. That is the great victory.

- Surat at-Tawba, 72, Qur'an

This classic, iconic garden style is called *chahar bagh*, meaning "four gardens." Sometimes the *chahar bagh* is referred to as an "Islamic" garden. It figures prominently in Sufi symbolism, paintings, and prose, for its spiritualized ideal inspired Sufi songs of love and mystical prose.



Watercolor drawing with bird's eye view of the Moonlight Garden complex, Taj Mahal, eighteenth century.



The following lines illustrate the tone and tenor of mystical love poetry: “Unable to perceive the shape of you, I find you all around me. Your presence fills my eyes with your love. It humbles my heart, for you are everywhere.”²

The objective to which Sufis aspired is summed up in the following quotation. “Sufism is more about promoting our inner garden, from languages to mere words, to wordlessness. It is more about educating our ear to listen to the voice that does not use words.”³

The Sufi mystic knew that one must step past the beauty and fragrance of the outer garden and into the realm beyond appearances to commune with the Beloved, for that is where Paradise is truly found.

The Biblical Garden

Early in the Bible, in the second chapter of Genesis, the Divine created a garden: “God [the Divine], planted a garden toward the east, in Eden, and there he [It] put the person whom he [It] had formed” (Genesis 2:8).

The Divine’s last act of creation, as told in Genesis, was to inhabit the Garden with people. In this manner, the work was completed. Perhaps the Divine’s Garden could not reach completion without us, but are we complete and whole without the Garden?

“They themselves will be like a well-watered garden, never to languish again” (Jeremiah 31:12).

Ancient Hebrews planted their gardens as practical and pleasurable places to stroll along shaded pathways. Stone benches provided spots to indulge in peaceful contemplation. There would be olive and pomegranate trees, date palms, apricot and fig trees. Grapes were grown for wine. Herbs such as coriander, mustard, hyssop, mint, and dill provided savor, and conferred healing and repast. Lilies were a favorite flower, as were saffron crocus, poppies, and anemones.⁴

Embedded in the walls of long-ruined gardens, archeologists found pollen revealing the presence of non-indigenous plants such as citron (etrog), myrtle, Persian walnut, birch, and cedar of Lebanon.⁵

The second most-renowned garden in the Bible, after Eden, is the Garden of Gethsemane. In Yeshua’s time, it may actually have been an olive grove. Today, it’s maintained as a garden of pilgrimage because scripture tells us that Yeshua came here prior to his crucifixion.

While the disciples slept, Yeshua prayed: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, but not as I wish, but as you wish” (Matthew 26:39).

It was to Gethsemane that Yeshua in despair retreated. Perhaps, in finding refuge among the olives, he felt more fervently the proximity of his Father.



One of the locations claimed to be the Garden of Gethsemane.



An impluvium in an atrium, looking through the tablinum toward the peristyle, House of Menander, Pompeii before 79 CE.

The Roman Atrium

While seeking subject matter for this article, the words “atrium of the heart” ran ceaselessly through my mind. What was my inner muse trying to impart?

Looking up “atrium of the heart,” I learned that the heart’s upper chambers are, in fact, called *atria*.⁶

Temporarily leaving aside this enigmatic and cryptic start to my research, atria of another sort arose – those of the classic Roman villa.

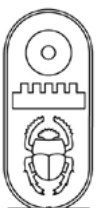
Roman villas were built around a central atrium consisting of an open court. At the center of the atrium was the *impluvium*, a shallow pool sunken into the floor to catch rainwater from the open roof. The impluvium also added cool ambience to the space.

Walls surrounding the atrium might be adorned with paintings of deities, cupids, or mythological characters. The atrium served as the home’s center of social and political life, and as private space for family to gather and relax.⁷

Just beyond the atrium – if the villa was grand enough – the *peristyle* was located. In this open-air space, plants, fruiting trees, and statuary created a retreat both useful and peaceful. Central to this space was a pond called a *piscine* in which fish could be kept for visual enjoyment and future meals. Some Roman villas combined an atrium and a peristyle into a single, large rectangular courtyard at the center of the villa.

Atrium-grown plants might include roses, cypress, and mulberry trees. Herbs and flowers such as rosemary, thyme, and hyssop were grown. Marigolds, narcissus, hyacinths, and violets perfumed the air.⁸

Within the cool, private confines of their atria, Roman citizens worshipped their deities and made offerings to the *Lares* – the household spirits of the villa. Sometimes philosophers were entertained and atria became spaces for lively discussions. The architectural placement of the atrium at the heart of the villa embodied its importance as the nucleus of inner and outer life.



The Healing Garden

Healing gardens are ubiquitous to many cultures. They might be seen alongside the humblest of abodes, within religious monasteries, and bordering chateaus. From modest plots of herbs encircled with wattle fencing or stones, knot gardens evolved in which curative herbs were planted in simple and complex patterns. Astrological and alchemical gardens grouped herbs and plants in accordance with their planetary signatures and powers.

In Europe, from the twelfth century to the present day, at chateau, palace, and manor, formal herb gardens remain popular. Trimmed box or hyssop hedges tidily bordered geometric beds containing vast assemblages of aromatic herbs and flowers – a cornucopia of sensory delight and bodily well-being! Healing gardens, regardless of size or grandeur, remain living pharmacies of therapeutic and planetary potency.

Monastery gardens included rows of vegetables, fruiting orchards, and henneries, in addition to plots of healing and culinary herbs. While much time was spent working the gardens, benches and stone seats provided places to sit and ponder scripture and doctrine.

At my former country home, a large kitchen garden grew near the house. It was a working garden with raised beds of vegetables and strawberries, and a rectangular garden of culinary and medicinal herbs. A large plot for corn, beans, squash, and melons made this a practical garden. Yet, there was space for flowers to enchant the eye and lure bees and butterflies. A bower of old lilacs divided the garden and made a shady nook for a metal chair. Here, I could sit and watch my garden grow. What actually occurred in those idyllic moments beneath the lilacs was that on some level my garden grew me.



The garden at the Commanderie Des Templiers de Coulommiers, a twelfth-century enclave in France.

Gardens of the Tarot

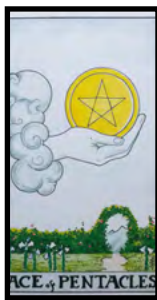
With its enigmatic history and diverse manifestations of interpretation and style, the Tarot – whether as a tool of prognostication or a path to enlightenment – features meaningful garden imagery.

Referring to the Universal Waite deck, we see symbolic hints of natural and cultivated landscapes on the cards of the Major Arcana. It's upon the cards of the Minor Arcana that most garden imagery is found, in whole or in part. Tarot garden symbolism mirrors the tenor of the temporal lives depicted upon the cards. Most of the Tarot's garden scenes appear only partially illustrated. Seldom do we glimpse the garden's entirety. It's as if its wholeness lies latent, waiting.

Contemplation on this aspect of the Tarot hints that the garden is dual in nature, manifesting both without and within. Perhaps we cultivate only particular aspects of ourselves leaving much of the Inner Garden in dormancy?

The suit of Pentacles is where most garden imagery is found, reflecting that this suit represents the Earth element.

On the Ace of Pentacles we find a complete garden, unoccupied except by a mysterious hand emerging from a cloud. What is being offered?



Does this card illustrate the beauty and bounty available when we cultivate our earthly nature with care and discrimination?

The Nine of Pentacles places someone – you, or me perhaps – at the

center of the garden. Pentacles bloom abundantly hinting that the earthly nature has been pruned and nurtured for fulsome growth. Grapes hang ripened, ready for the gardener. A hooded bird of prey sits upon the occupant's hand – one's animal nature gently controlled?



Two trees stand at the back of the garden. Do they represent a duality that has been balanced within the person standing between?

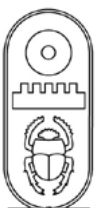
Surely the individual occupying the garden has cultivated it with care and patience, enjoying the abundance, knowing its secret, for this garden is shown lush and complete.



Of further interest is the Five of Pentacles, populated by two battered individuals struggling against a winter storm. There's no hint of petal or leaf in this bleak scene. Yet, seemingly unnoticed by the pair, a window of pentacles glows warmly.

Perhaps these two are unaware of the comfort and companionship promised by the welcoming radiance?

Certainly, this pair appears to have been cast from their garden, or is unaware of its existence?



If only they would turn and look!
If only they'd widen the circle of their
awareness and embrace the succor awaiting
within the windowed
sanctuary!

The Metaphorical Garden

Gardens send their
roots deep into the
human psyche. Perhaps
we cannot begin
to reach a budding
awareness of the inner
self until we trace these
roots to the mysterious
and fertile places they
occupy within us.

An ancient rhyme
asks: "How does your
garden grow?"⁹

This question is
applicable not only to
the physical garden, for poets like Walt
Whitman also speak with the language of
the heart.

Unseen buds, infinite, hidden well,
Under the snow and ice, under the
darkness, in every square or
cubic inch,

Germinal, exquisite, in delicate
lace, microscopic, unborn....¹⁰

Poetry may be appreciated both
intellectually and emotionally, certainly.
But, if we penetrate more deeply, it hints at
the mystical as well. Poetry is the language
of the soul spoken with the words of the
heart, and illustrated with pen upon the
page.

By reading carefully what flows from
the poet's pen, listening intently to the
mystic's wisdom, contemplating the Tarot's
garden imagery – we gently begin our
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approach towards the center of a secret,
"Inner Garden."

Entering the Garden

The journey into
the garden is not
outward as I'd once
thought and sought.
It is a sojourn into the
deepest aspect of our
being. It's here we'll
begin to unearth an
astonishing splendor.
This is the secret
known to the mystic,
penned by the poet,
and illustrated upon
the Tarot.

Somehow we've
forgotten how and
where to find entry, or
even why we should
seek it. Perhaps the
pace and complexity of
our lives has obscured

the way. However, we needn't revive the
path unaided! We have the examples of
Sufis, poets, and mystics as guides.

Perhaps my muse's puzzling directive,
"atrium of the heart," was two-fold. It gave
me a starting point for my research – the
word "atrium." It also led me unerringly to
the place where each of us may commune
within the garden.

As we each tend to and seek the
"Inner Garden," consciousness expands
beyond form and beyond thought. At
this threshold, between thought and pure
consciousness, we enter the center of the
garden. Here, all boundaries and limitations
fall away. Here, we discover communion
with the living essence pulsing at the heart
of all things and within ourselves.

Sufi mystics showed us the way
through the physical garden, and into
the "Inner Garden". Poets have written



Garden Entrance, *H. Spencer Lewis.*



Keukenhof flower garden in the Netherlands.

of the inner life of the Garden, and the Tarot shows us that the “Inner Garden” is reflected outwardly.

Here is their roadmap as I’ve distilled it:

One must tarry, sit a spell, and allow the senses to open to the natural using all five of them – feast the eye upon beauty, color, and form; taste the aromatic herb; smell the myriad fragrances; hear the wind, water, birdsong; feel leaf and petal, the moist, opulent soil.

Then, we must again feel – this time emotionally – the poignancy that these sensations stir within us. Is it peace, joy, calm, yearning, connection – something else?

Lastly, grasp tightly the gossamer thread of Love and allow it to lead you into the Center of the Garden, toward the Being-ness within.

Endnotes

¹ The Levant includes the countries of Syria, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine.

² Hakim Sanai, *The Walled Garden of Truth*, translated by Priya Hemenway, (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publisher, 2002), pg. 41.

³ “Cultivate your inner garden with Sufism,” *Express Tribune*, accessed September 15, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1403143/cultivate-inner-garden-sufism>.

⁴ “Plants of the Garden,” Charles Stuart University, accessed September 15, 2021, <https://www.csu.edu.au/special/accc/biblegarden/plants-of-the-garden>.

⁵ “The secret life of plants in an ancient, royal Judean garden,” Israel21c: Uncovering Israel, accessed September 15, 2021, <https://www.israel21c.org/the-secret-life-of-plants-in-an-ancient-royal-judean-garden/>.

⁶ “Atrium,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed September 15, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/science/atrium-heart>.

⁷ “Sample Plan of a Roman House,” vroma.org, accessed September 15, 2021, <http://vroma.org/vromans/bmcmansu/house.html>.

⁸ “Ancient Roman Gardens,” History and Archaeology Online, accessed September 15, 2021, <https://historyandarchaeologyonline.com/ancient-roman-gardens/>.

⁹ “Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary,” Old European Nursery Rhyme.

¹⁰ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004).

