

A Concise History of Islamic Gardens

The idea of a garden as an image of Paradise can be traced back at least 5,000 years to ancient Mesopotamia. Then the land, as it is now in Iran and Iraq, was dry, arid and hot and it was therefore natural to imagine paradise as a green oasis with running water, plants and trees for shade. Early writings such as the Epic of Gilgamesh (found on clay tablets in 1400 BC, but thought to be written 1000 years previous), described paradise with four rivers dividing the garden according to the points of the compass and coming together to form a cross. This is just one of the many themes that have been reinterpreted again and again and one that can most notably be attributed to the paradise gardens of the Islamic tradition.

It was in Persia that the practice of building gardens truly developed; with the development of irrigation canals and underground canals (qanat), cultivation became possible in the desert region. Although the evolution of this design is unclear, the oldest literary use of the Chahar Bagh (that is the quadripartite garden design, from chahar meaning four and bagh meaning garden) dates from around 900 BC. Over the next half a century, gardens became areas for social activity entertaining guests with music, poetry and dancing, but also doubling up as military encampments. Walls up to 4m high were built to protect the beautiful scented enclosures.

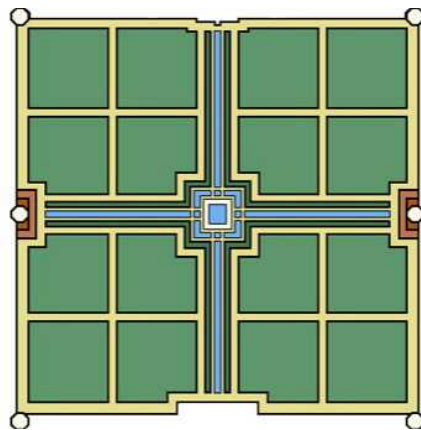


Diagram illustrating the Taj Mahal layout using traditional Chahar Bagh form
(Source: taj-mahal.net)

When Islam developed in the 7th century, overpowering the Byzantine and Persian Empires by 642 AD, the people absorbed the new religion and way of life in great measures, and so developed new philosophies which in turn led to revolutionary understandings of mathematics, arts and designs. It is said that “scarcely ever has a people shown such aptitude for adopting foreign civilisation, and setting a common stamp on every art.” Islamic philosophers reasoned that the more perfect something is, the more beautiful it is and the more pleasure it produces. God’s beauty, being the most perfect, therefore yields the most pleasure. Artistic creativity became a means of communicating the truths of religion and philosophy, and works of art including the garden design aspired to perfection in order to aid the contemplation of divine truth.

The Quran, revealed from God to Muhammad (pbh) between 609 and 632 AD, built on the developed traditions of paradise as a garden to a great degree. The phrase “Jannat tajri min tahtiha al-anhar”, Gardens underneath which rivers flow is repeated over 30 times and it also defines 8 different levels of paradise that are characterised as gardens, including “the Garden of Immortality” “The Garden of Bliss” and “The garden of Retreat”.

Gardens, as well as buildings, courtyards and carpets, were designed to represent a universal order that symbolised the unity of God, with every aspect of the design being clear, legible and relating to another. In Islam, mathematics is considered the language of the intellect and it helps to link the structure between nature and man, both creations of God, enabling Muslims to understand their proportions to nature and relation to the cosmic order.

Poetry prospered in part due to the wonders of the gardens. By the 9/10th century a new genre of poetry known as The Rawdiya or Garden Poem had developed across the Islamic empire to describe the music of the flowing water and the coolness of the shade, highlighting the artificial features that contrasted strongly to the reality of the natural world and inviting people to visualise the prosperity of life after this one on Earth. Early Muslims everywhere made gardens that glimpsed at the heavenly gardens to come. Early geographers reported that Nisbin, a city in Mesopotamia, had 40,000 gardens and Damascus had 110,000; Basra had miles of canals criss-crossing gardens and orchards; and all across North Africa were a multitude of gardens.

Gardens in Islamic Spain were designed to resemble the great palaces and mosques of the Islamic kingdom and inspired the development of botanic gardens in order to procure new trees, shrubs and flowers, such as the date-palm, fig, pomegranate, olive, cypress, Oriental Plane tree, various fruit trees, grapevines, hibiscus, tulips, roses and iris’. The benefit that this brought to Europe was not only aesthetic, but it also brought medical and environmental values. The region pioneered in horticulture, agriculture and the development of farming manuals.

The notion of the garden as paradise was also invoked in the Christian Middle Ages to serve the needs of the religious community. From as early as the 11th century, you could find gardens of nobles influenced by the Islamic Paradise garden, brought to Europe by travellers and crusaders, but rich with Christian flower symbolism with each flower illustrating an aspect of the Christian faith. The Renaissance style of gardening also revived the paradise garden in Europe and gardens highlighting that everything on earth had a counterpart in heaven could be found in Italy, Germany and Scotland.



Orto botanico di Padova, Italy – The world’s largest Botanic Garden still in original location
(Source en.wikipedia.org)

Islamic Gardens in the UK

Sezincote, Gloucestershire

This Jacobean manner house was 'indianised' between 1805 and 1812 by the Cockerell brothers and artist Thomas Daniell, who had resided for many years in India. Both the garden and the house deliberately mixed Hindu and Muslim details, as the Mughal Emperors had done with their architecture to celebrate the culturally diverse country that they had conquered. A grand dome was constructed on the top of the house and minarets on the corners to show the Islamic influence and the pillars and horizontal beams over the entrance as well as the garden that includes a temple to Surya, the sun god, were of Hindu influence. The Islamic or Persian garden was not added until much later, when Lady Kleinworth returned from India in 1965 inspired by the traditional "paradise garden" used a lot by the Mughal Emperors. She added a north to south water canal and paths that separated the garden in to four parts and perfectly aligned with the house. The central fountain is an octagon representing the transitional geometric form between the circle and the square representing the heaven and the earth respectively. Traditional cypresses, whose evergreen qualities represent immortality, were replaced with Irish Yew trees to withstand the British climate and hedges were planted around the garden to give the traditional sense of seclusion in this style of gardens.



The Ismaili Centre

Exhibition Road, South Kensington, London

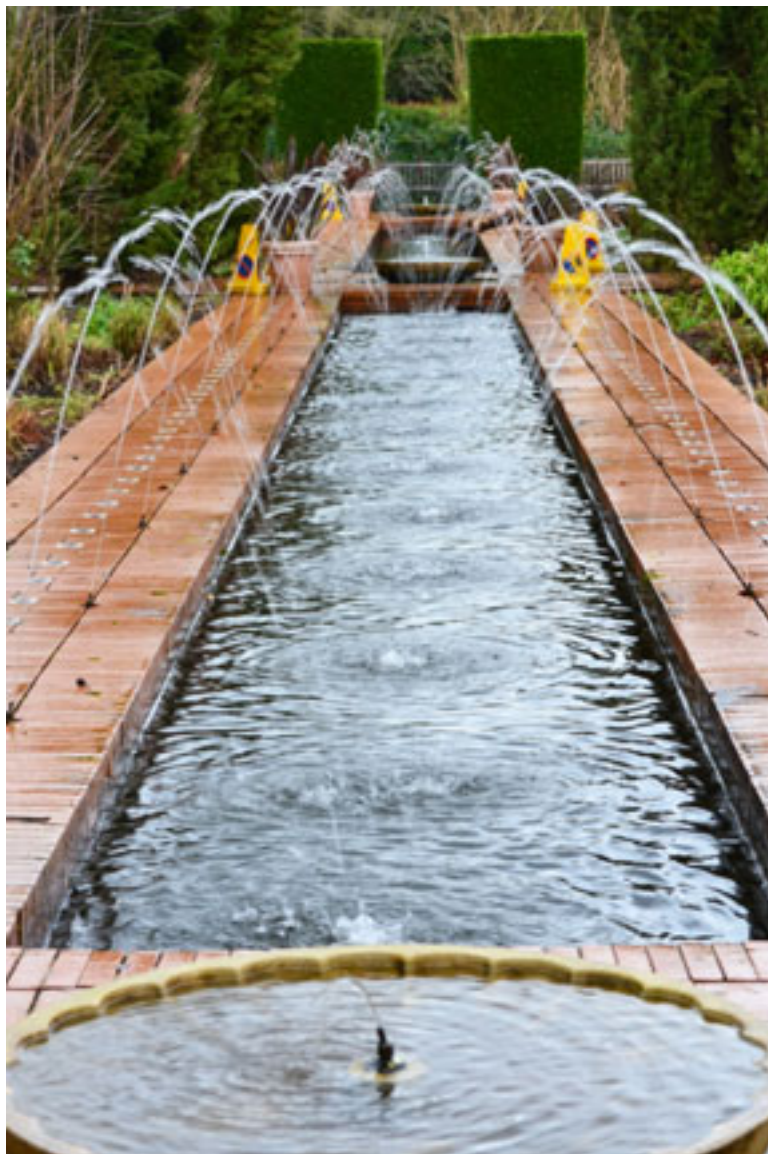
The centre was constructed over 25 years ago and was the first religious, cultural and social space specifically designed for the Ismaili community in the Western world. Situated alongside the Natural History Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Centre's architecture called for the building to be compatible with its surroundings, while remaining true to the Islamic architectural tradition. The beautiful roof top garden was designed with the building to echo the Quranic garden of paradise and is surrounded by glass corridors that shelter it from the noise and bustle of London. A central octagonal fountain is fed from four pools connected with narrow channels and granite is used alongside greenery highlighting the spiritual significance of using natural materials for form and decoration. Prince Charles said of the centre, "I can only applaud your emphasis on intellectual and cultural exploration as a means of integration, and your determination to discharge your obligations as citizens of this country without losing your own distinctive traditions."



Alhambra Garden

Roundhay Park, Leeds, West Yorkshire

Roundhay Park in Leeds is one of the biggest urban parks in the world and it too has special gardens to celebrate gardening traditions from around the world. The Alhambra garden is based on the Patio Acequia or the Garden of Irrigation in the Alhambra palace in Granada, built by Moorish rules in the 13th century. Water at this time was used as an ornamental feature to show power and wealth, however the geometric layout partitioned in to sections and softened by informal planting clearly shows the Islamic influence. Like the garden in Spain, Leeds' Alhambra garden is planted with both medicinal and ornamental plants and lined with high trees to create seclusion as the palace walls would.



Moghul Gardens

Lister Park, Bradford, West Yorkshire

Another example of the Moghul influence on garden design is celebrated in Lister Park in Bradford. After receiving a large grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund the authorities consulted with the local community about what they would want for their park. The park, which also includes a Botanical garden, reflects Bradford's multi-cultural communities and has initiated a great ownership and care over the public space. The water garden that stretches 120 yards was designed to incorporate traditional Moghul features. The composite stone, while not a natural material, reflects the stonework of Cartwright Hall as the gardens of the palaces in India would have done and the tiled patterns lining the paths and continuing in the railings along the garden also reflect the designs found in mosaics around the world. The conifer trees lining the garden create shelter and peace from the rest of the park and a large area overlooking the water creates a space for parties and celebrations.



Chumleigh Gardens

Burgess Park, Southwark, London

Burgess Park in the London Borough of Southwark was created after the highly-built up and industrialised area suffered significant bomb damage in WW2. The alms-houses were restored among other listed buildings and Chumleigh gardens surrounding them were designed to reflect the diversity of the communities that live in the area. The World Gardens at Chumleigh were opened in 1992 and consist of the Mediterranean, Oriental, Afro-Caribbean, Islamic and English gardens. The Islamic Garden utilises the tranquil colours and tiled patterns that one would find in gardens from the Middle East and a large 8 point star is a central pool linking four paths from the other gardens. The plants are from North Africa including the Moroccan Broom tree and a large date palm tree creates shade and secrecy from the other areas.

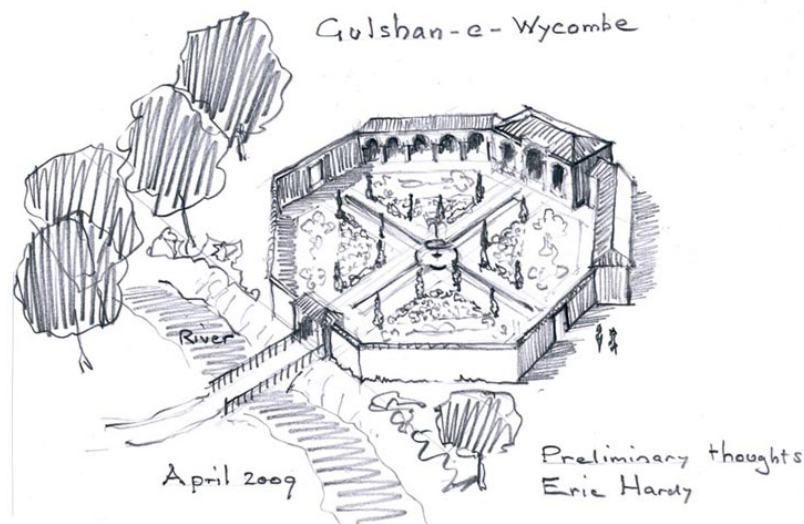


Gulshan-E-Wycombe

High Wycombe



10 years ago a small group of people active in the community of High Wycombe were inspired by the concept of the environment in Islam and how Islamic gardens can engage people. A multi-million pound project called Gulshan-e-Wycombe aims to promote engagement in this diverse society. The model of this Islamic garden has been designed by a local architect called Eric Hardy, as a unique icon in the UK. The Committee are currently trying to locate a site for the garden to be built, once identified they will begin the fundraising for the garden.



The British, like the early Islamic settlers, are a “nation of gardeners” and a Faith Regen Foundation led project sought to break down barriers between Muslims and non-Muslims by connecting them

to gardening traditions while also connecting Muslims in the UK to their heritage. Working alongside experts in the field, FRF established an Islamic Garden on the rooftop of Oaklands School in Bethnal Green. Students learnt about the history, design and symbolism of the gardens and designed and created a large mosaic to decorate their new space, now called “The garden of Contemplation.” The garden replicates traditional features such as the water canals leading to a central pool, a geometric layout partitioning the garden with beds for flowers and buxus hedging and fruit trees, herbs and olive trees as described in the gardens of paradise.

The Garden of Contemplation



Look out for this as part of the London Open Squares Weekend, Early June time!

There is a wealth of teachings in Islam about the obligations of Muslims to protect and nurture the natural environment, and for everyone gardening can improve confidence and self-esteem through a sense of ownership and responsibility.

The most important aspects of Islamic Gardens and what distinguishes them from other gardens are:

- The intention of the garden, helping the visitor to reach an inmost tranquillity
- The unity of the garden through the elements, geometric layout and the surrounding architecture that reflects the fundamental teaching of the Quran – at-Tawhid, that within everything in the created world lies an inexpressible spirit.
- It's relation to environmental ethics – humans are needed to care and nurture it so that it may keep its form.

Most of the Islamic gardens in the UK do not give architectural interpretations or aim to teach on an ethical or philosophical basis. There is an opportunity for people to engage with history and heritage through the meaningful designs and specific features like water. An Islamic Garden is a holistic garden; its very aim is to give you everything that you want from a garden – just like the gardens of Paradise.

Resource: 'The Art of the Islamic Garden,' Emma Clark.