



BEYOND ‘PARADISE GARDENS’: PRODUCTIVITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP IN THE AGA KHAN GARDEN

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Introduction

This article will reflect on the purpose of Muslim gardens, arguing that Muslim gardens have historically made positive and productive contributions to society. In the modern world, this role can extend to the pressing challenges of environmental conservation, as seen through the example of the Aga Khan Garden in Edmonton, Canada.

Gardens of Paradise

One of the common descriptions applied to the diverse gardens found in Muslim cultures is the term ‘Paradise Gardens’. This phrase suggests that Muslim gardens are created primarily as reflections of paradise as described in the Qur’an, in which paradise is symbolised as a garden. Such an interpretation, viewed primarily through a religious and social lens, emphasises the role of gardens as places for pleasure, relaxation and spiritual reflection on the Divine. Emma Clark summarises the symbolism of ‘Paradise Gardens’ in this way: ‘Centred on a spiritual vision of the cosmos, these gardens... mirrors of their Heavenly counterparts – aim, like all sacred art to draw the visitor closer to God’.¹

Muslim gardens typically offer an engaging aesthetic and sensory experience, featuring colourful plantings, fragrant scents, the sounds of running water, and beautiful geometric and symmetric design elements. Yet, it is important to view such gardens not only through an aesthetic lens or as a reflection of spiritual ideals, but to see them as serving multiple functions motivated by a variety of aims. Although gardens have served a variety of purposes in Muslim history, one purpose that should be given attention is gardens as spaces of productivity.

Gardens of Productivity

The historical roots of the Muslim garden tradition lie in the agricultural need to grow food in the hot, dry climates of the Middle East. As Muslim empires expanded, the control and careful use of water to irrigate the land was essential for survival and prosperity in both rural and urban settings. In rural contexts, one common garden form was the *bustan* (orchard), in which fruits and other crops were grown. What many people typically think of today as Muslim gardens, such as the landscape architecture at the Taj Mahal, Humayun’s Tomb, or the Alhambra, were built as royal gardens by rulers or elites in society. While serving as a space of pleasure, relaxation and social interaction, royal gardens also served as important sites of agricultural growth, botanical research and scientific innovation. As Andrew M. Watson writes,



“By the tenth century, the royal gardens at Cordoba seem to have become botanical gardens, with fields for experimentation with seeds, cuttings and roots brought in from the outermost reaches of the world... Thus, the gardens of the medieval Islamic world, and particularly the royal gardens, were places where business was mixed with pleasure, science with art. By being part of a network, which linked together the agricultural and botanical activities of distant regions, they played a role – perhaps one of great importance – in the diffusion of useful plants.”²

Environmental Stewardship

One of the great challenges, and most hotly contested issues, of the twenty-first century is the increasing scale of human impact on the environment. The need for increased environmental sustainability to combat climate change and pollution is a significant concern for many in the world today.

The notion of environmental stewardship is also rooted in the Islamic faith, as the Qur'an refers to humans as trustees of Divine creation, and thus Muslims are called upon to leave the world in a better condition than they inherited it. At the inauguration ceremony of the Aga Khan Garden in Edmonton, His Highness the Aga Khan stated that ‘a central part of the Garden tradition is the high calling of human stewardship, our responsibility to honor, to protect, and to share the gifts of the natural world’.³

Productivity in the Aga Khan Garden

One example of positive contributions to the environment in modern Muslim gardens is the Aga Khan Garden. It was one of three garden projects opened in 2018 as part of the Diamond Jubilee of His Highness the Aga Khan and given as a gift to the University of Alberta Botanic Garden.

The Aga Khan Garden participates in the historic tradition of Muslim gardens being sites of productivity in three ways. First, as part of a university botanical garden, it will be a site of research, innovation and education for the wider community. In its educational role, it aims to teach about both wetland ecology and Muslim culture and design. Second, the garden features a formal *chahar-bagh* (four gardens) which connects to a large pond, around which is an informal *bustan* with trees that will grow a variety of fruits. Third, the garden is designed in a way that it can contribute positively to the local ecology. One of the province of Alberta's most pressing conservation issues is the impact that oil sands mining has on surrounding wetland infrastructure. As D. Fairchild Ruggles explains,

“As a response that encourages remediation and contributes to wetland restoration, the [Aga Khan] Garden's *bustan* will include diverse native plants in such abundance that the seed can be gathered to provide stock for planting new wetlands. In this way, the model of an Islamic garden... for the twenty-first century is one that engages actively and beneficially with its environment, whether it be in Edmonton or Agra.”⁴

Conclusion

Muslim gardens not only reflect a spiritual conception of the life hereafter, but also engage with Islamic ethics in the here-and-now. Through the example of the Aga Khan Garden, we can see that Muslim gardens of the twenty-first century can also contribute positively to the wider society and the pressing environmental challenges of our day. This is in keeping with the historic Muslim values of using intellectual resources for the benefit of others and the importance of being good stewards of the Divine creation.



¹ Emma Clark. “The Symbolism of the Islamic Garden”, *Islamic Arts & Architecture*, 2 October 2011, <http://islamic-arts.org/2011/the-symbolism-of-the-islamic-garden/>.

² Andrew M. Watson. “Gardens of Islam”, *Muslim Heritage*, <http://muslim.heritage.com/article/gardens-islam>.

³ His Highness the Aga Khan. “Inauguration of the Aga Khan Garden, Alberta”, *Aga Khan Development Network*. University of Alberta Botanic Garden, Edmonton. 16 October 2018, <https://www.akdn.org/speech/sua-alteza-o-aga-khan/inauguration-aga-khan-garden-alberta>.

⁴ D. Fairchild Ruggles. “An Islamic Garden in Edmonton”, in *Heritage of the Mughal World*, edited by Philip Jodidio, 267–271. Munich: Prestel, 2015.