

# Gardens

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**I**N BRITAIN most people have a garden, and, with rain all the year round, watering is only necessary in dry spells in summer. In what is known as a Mediterranean climate, which parts of the USA and Australia amongst other places experience also, things are very different, with rain falling mostly in the winter months, and summer months being hot and dry. Such conditions prevail in Israel, where from early May to early October there is no rain.

So, when we read in the Bible of gardens we must not think of the sort of gardens that are enjoyed in the temperate climates in which many of us live. Gardens in ancient Israel were only possible where there was a spring that provided water all the year round or a stream that did not dry up in summer, and the latter were few and far between. Furthermore, many of the gardens that we have are devoted solely to flowers, shrubs and grass, though some are used to grow fruit and vegetables as well. In Old Testament times a garden would be predominantly a place to grow fruit and vegetables. The growing of wheat and barley and the cultivation of vines, olives and

figs, would not require rain all the year round, for there was sufficient rain during the wet season for the grain and fruit to develop and be harvested when the dry weather came along, but a vegetable garden would need a year-round supply of water.

The first garden mentioned in the Bible is, of course, the Garden of Eden, and two of the characteristics of this garden are that it was planted with a great variety of fruit trees and was watered by a river (Gen. 2:8-10), as with the gardens mentioned in the previous paragraph. The Jordan valley, where Sodom and Gomorrah were situated, is referred to as being originally "well watered every where, before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt". Before God's judgements of fire and brimstone on these wicked cities, the area was like the Garden of Eden, watered by the river Jordan and presumably with a profusion of fruit trees, a sight which drew Lot to it, having viewed it from a distance (13:10).

The link that is also made here with Egypt takes us to another passage, Deuteronomy 11, where

**The gardens at Ramat Hanadiv, Israel. Such gardens require much irrigation in Middle Eastern countries, and would not have existed in ancient times.**

Picture: Tony Benson





**A garden in the Kidron Valley by the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem. This is thought to be the area of “the king’s garden” of 2 Kings 25:4 and Nehemiah 3:15.**

Picture: Tony Benson

the land of Israel is contrasted with “the land of Egypt, from whence ye came out, where thou sowedst thy seed, and wateredst it with thy foot, as a garden of herbs” (v. 10). (We think of herbs as referring to plants used to flavour food, rather than to vegetables, but when the AV translation was made the word referred to vegetables, which is the word modern translations use.) Egyptian agriculture along the Nile valley depended on irrigation from the river via a network of channels, and the reference to watering by the foot refers either to the operation of a device to lift water from the bigger channels into smaller ones, or the use of the foot to divert water into different parts of a garden by breaking down the mud walls of the little channels by which water reached the gardens. Another reference to a garden growing vegetables is found in 1 Kings 21, where we read that Naboth had a vineyard close to King Ahab’s palace. It was evidently watered by a spring, for Ahab desired it as “a garden of herbs”, that is, a vegetable garden (vv. 1,2).

There are a number of passages in Scripture which link gardens with streams or springs in a figurative sense. When Balaam looked upon the encampment of Israel and said, “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel!”, he went on to say, “As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river’s side, as the trees of lign aloes which the LORD hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters” (Num. 24:5,6). In the Song of Solomon the language of a fruitful garden by springs of water is used of the bride:

“A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits; camphire, with spikenard, spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices: a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon” (4:12-15). Here the garden contains not only fruit but also all manner of plants that could be used for ointments and spices.

In Isaiah we read, “the LORD shall guide thee continually . . . and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not” (58:11); and in Jeremiah, concerning the exiled Jews returning to Zion, “their soul shall be as a watered garden” (31:12). On the other hand, Isaiah, speaking of judgement to come upon Judah, says, “ye shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth, and as a garden that hath no water” (1:30).

We can apply the ‘garden’ figure to ourselves, of course, for we are expected to bring forth fruits in the formation of godly characters, and we do this through the water of the Word. Hence the man that trusts in God is spoken of as being like “a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit” (Jer. 17:8). Perhaps we can consider the present economic crisis as a time of drought, and gain comfort from the fact that the water of God’s Word will never dry up.