

# Iranian gardens as multisensory places

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A garden the water of whose river was limpid  
A grove the melody of whose birds was harmonious.

The former full of bright-coloured tulips,

The latter full of fruits of various kinds

The wind had in the shade of its trees

Spread out a bed of all kinds of flowers.

—Saadi, 13th century

# IRANIAN GARDENS AS MULTISENSORY PLACES

*Annemarie Bucher*

The gardens of Middle Eastern antiquity left a deep impression on the history of Western gardens and continue to make lasting impressions on their visitors today. Such gardens are places where cultural traditions, natural features, and social functions come together, activating and addressing all the senses. It is particularly the Persian gardens, which form the foundation of Iran's garden heritage today and lay the ground for the country's landscape architecture, which demonstrate this multifaceted relation between natures<sup>1</sup> and cultures.

Beyond the evidence that can be seen in the gardens themselves and specialist literature,<sup>2</sup> the Persian garden has also left its indelible influence in the imagination of art and literature more broadly. The gardens of Iran are places where a rich interconnectedness of physical spaces, ideas, and perceptions are to be found.<sup>3</sup>

## Natures, cultural traditions and heritage

Gardens are places of significance, and throughout history they have accumulated a whole range of meanings and forms, neither infinite nor arbitrary. As cultural traditions and environmental conditions have influenced this iterative practice of creating meaning and form, they have created a discernible, repeated but endlessly varied repertoire of forms that could be described as kind of pattern language.<sup>4</sup>

Gardens or garden-like places are found in many cultures and societies. Seen as constructed places, they are typically dedicated either to horticultural production or pleasure and recreation, or sometimes

1 According to the current debate on nature in parallel to "cultures," I use the plural also for "natures."

2 Hobhouse, Penelope: *Persische Gärten. Paradiese des Orients*, München 2005; Mahmoudi Farahani, Leila; Motamed, Bahareh; Jamei, Elmira: *Persian Gardens: Meanings, Symbolism, and Design*, *Landscape Online*, 46 (2016), no. 1, pp. 1–19; Mansouri, Seyed Amir: *Chahar Bagh. A study of the origin of the Chahar Bagh concept as a model for Iranian Gardens*, *Manzar*, 3 (2011), no. 14, pp. 16–23; Mansouri, Seyed Amir: *Phenomenology of the Surrounding Wall in Persian Garden*, *Manzar*, 7 (2016), no. 33, pp. 6–11; Pourhashemi, Hosna: "Garten und Park. Paradiesisches Abbild".

In: *TEC21. Iran II: Der Garten-Archetyp Chahar Bagh*, 38 (2018); Wilber, Donald: *Persian Gardens and Garden Pavilions*, Rutland/Tokyo 1962, second edition, Washington D.C. 1979.

3 The following observations are based to a great extent on my visits to Iranian gardens during my two trips to Iran in 2016: I would like to thank Amin Mahan and Reihane Khorramrouei, Khosro Sagheb-Talebi and Mitra Sodagar for enabling these visits.

4 Alexander, Christopher et al.: *A Pattern Language*, Oxford 1977. See also, Christophe Girot's garden archetypes in Girot, Christophe: *The Course of Landscape Architecture*, New York 2016.

to both. They unquestionably play a substantial role in shaping the mental and physical spaces in which we live. As they carry and embody layers of both natures and cultures, they possess a heterotopical<sup>5</sup> capacity to mediate and negotiate meanings and shapes of nature, culture and society.

Contemporary garden culture in Iran is to a large extent a culture concerned with cultural heritage. Many of Iran's gardens have become protected as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to Western garden history, in Iran it is traditions and not modernities that are primary.

### Paraideza and Chahar Bagh

The earliest gardens are recorded in myths, and some are confirmed by archaeological discoveries of texts and images. These sources tell us about the first Sumerian gardens, the legendary hanging gardens of Babylon, also known as the hanging gardens of Queen Semiramis who ruled Babylon in the ninth century BC.

Assyrian kings began setting up gardens and parks on the banks of rivers, used irrigation, fenced the land and planted trees. King Tiglath Pileser I (1115–1077 BC) was known for his gardens in Ashur, on the banks of the river Tigris. He imported trees such as oaks and cedars from outside of Persia. King Ashurbanipal is said to have had a pleasure garden with juniper, ebony, olive, and almond trees and more spectacular plants from other parts of the ancient world.

These enclosed spaces with a rich selection of plants and sometimes animals were called *paraidezas*, or walled gardens. They separated a constructed green nature from an arid, inhospitable desert-like environment. The function-related meaning of the Persian "paradise" was transformed into a symbolic sphere in the Christian and Islamic traditions, where paradise came to mean a spiritual, peaceful counterplace to the earthly world where all good things were in abundance.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, Michel: "Des Espace Autres". In: Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité, 5 (1984), pp. 46–49.

<sup>6</sup> Internet: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1372>, consulted 01.10.2019.

The first known Persian garden surrounded Cyrus the Great's palace of Pasargadae in 600 BC<sup>7</sup>. He placed a rectangular garden bed, with symmetrical water channels, paths and trees, opposite the throne hall. According to Zoroastrian division of the universe into four parts, four elements and four seasons, he organized the open space with a similar fourfold structure. This fourfold garden layout, first found in Pasargadae, was referred to as the *chahar bagh* and served as a prototype for such gardens ever since. The fourfold and rectilinear plan encompasses a walled space with an orchard, water canals, basins, fruit and shade-providing trees, pavilions, fragrant flowers, shrubs and sometimes animals.

The Palace Garden in Pasargadae provides us with evidence of Persian gardens as a vehicle of royal representation. Here the concept of the *chahar bagh* started to unfold its impact on designing nature. The concept of the fourfold garden has been adapted to many places and roles. Fin Garden in Kashan and Eram Garden in Shiraz, for instance, prove how the garden as an enclosed space can serve as an indispensable part of noble residences.

#### *Transcultural effects*

The *chahar bagh* has long been a basic pattern of garden design in both the East and West: its quadripartite geometrical partitioning, practical and symbolic use of water and certain plants was spread to India and the Iberian Peninsula with the expansion of the Islam. From there, it left its technical and symbolic traces on the gardens of the Christian Middle Ages.

Not only the design concept of the Persian garden, but also the plants, have prompted wide interest. When Alexander the Great conquered parts of the Persian Empire in 334 BC, he brought back with him new varieties of plants. A large number of ornamental plants (such as tulips, roses and irises) and crop plants originate from this region.

7 Stronach, David: "The Royal Garden at Pasargadae: Evolution and Legacy". In: De Meyer, Leon; Haerinck, Ernie (Ed.): *Archaeologia Iranica et Orientalis. Miscellanea in Honorem Louis Vanden*

Berghe, vol. 1, Gent 1989; Stronach, David: "The Garden as a Political Statement: Some Case Studies from the Near East in the First Millennium B.C." In: *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 4 (1990), pp. 171–180.

## Key features of Persian gardens

Iranian gardens typically consist of the geometrical organization of specific elements that include an enclosed piece of land, water and plants. Yet every single garden is a special case, for these elements were put together in very different ways.

### *Enclosure*

Persian gardens are enclosed, architecturally defined outdoor spaces. One of their key features is that they are fenced or walled around their perimeter. High walls, usually made from adobe, separate the garden from its surrounding natural and cultural environments. While the garden interior, filled with abundant greenery is for recreation, seclusion or solitude, outside there is either an arid, inhospitable natural landscape or a frantic, public urban space. Applying architectural delimitations to extract a space from its surrounding land is a measure for counteracting and protecting nature at the same time. Hence, Iranian gardens are places of solitude, rest and security.

### *Water and irrigation*

Without water, Persian gardens could not exist.<sup>8</sup> To deal with water scarcity, hydraulic techniques such as qanats and wells were constructed to bring fresh water to the garden. Thus, technical water veins and springs form an important part of the garden.

Water provides a cooling effect and is the source of the green vegetation. Reflecting pools, flowing channels of water, waterfalls, splashing and gurgling sounds of the water demonstrate how aesthetic, symbolic and horticultural functions become one. Pools, channels and springs are also the main sources of water supply to gardens. Trees are often found in water-filled ditches to prevent evaporation and to protect the roots of the trees.

<sup>8</sup> In her text "A Vision of Zayanderood" Mahroo Movahedi fathoms the influence of the sensation of water on a whole culture. Movahedi, Mahroo: "A Vision of Zayanderood". In: Pamphlet. Lost in Paradise: A Journey Through the Persian Landscape,

24 (2020), p. 67; Mahdi Nejad, Jamal-e-Din; Azemati, Hamidreza; Zarghami, Esmail; Habib Abad, Ali Sadeghi: "The Role of Water in Persian Gardens". In: Open Journal of Ecology, 7 (2017), pp. 41–54, ISSN Online: 2162–1993.

## Plants

Vegetation is a vital part of Iranian gardens.<sup>9</sup> Trees, shrubs, and flowers vary according to climate and soil. Their different purposes—including shade, food and ornamentation—are closely intertwined with a symbolic meaning. The presence of evergreen tree canopies is firstly due to the need for shade and is secondly associated with the notion that trees in heaven are infinitely green and fresh. Likewise, flowers and shrubs play an important role, providing colors and scents to delight the eyes and noses of the visitors. Seasonal flowers are mostly planted in front of palaces, and small aromatic flowers are planted beside trees. The experiences of fragrances in Iranian gardens are hard to describe with words.

### *Geometry and symmetry*

Geometry and symmetry are the main principles of Iranian garden construction. According to the ancient quadripartite plan of the *chahar bagh*, most Iranian gardens have rectangular plans and are divided into squares or rectangular shapes; their elements usually follow a symmetrical order. The focus is on the main axis with a water canal and the main path. A pathway usually surrounds the garden, and the main footpaths or routes and water courses divide the garden into parterres and plots. At the intersection of footpaths or water channels, small pavilions or water pools break up the strict lines and invite the visitor to stay.

<sup>9</sup> See Richter, Dunja: “The Cypress as a Bridge between the Orient and the Occident”. In: Pamphlet.

Lost in Paradise: A Journey Through the Persian Landscape, 24 (2020), p. 59.

## Restoring the senses

Spending time in an Iranian garden gives the impression of being far away from stressful everyday experiences and a feeling of being connected with nature—even though these gardens are man-made, designed places. The aspects of physical and mental wellbeing are more relevant now more than ever before.<sup>10</sup> With their multisensory properties, such gardens support physical and mental wellbeing.

Persian gardens were not made for walking, strolling, or camping. They were made to be enjoyed for their views, fresh air, good fragrances and the sound of water and birds—to be enjoyed from sitting in a shaded place or a garden pavilion.

Resting in the shade during the hot hours is a necessary luxury. The dense canopies, greenery covering the ground and flowing waters provide a significant cooling effect. From the beginning, water was a vital element not only for the body but for the soul. Water is the source of all the green, but also of the sounds, which directly create feelings. The sensory value of flowing water, or a water surface mirroring the sky, has an effect on the human psyche and body.

Fragrances lure the senses. Odorous plants heighten our olfactory perception. Because odors have a strong effect on people, both on the consciousness and on the subconscious, fragrances were used in ancient Persia in everyday as well as in ritual contexts. The choice of aromatic plants in the gardens therefore heeds a tradition of speaking through a language of fragrances.

The visit in the garden awakens and stimulates the whole sensory apparatus. Addressing the visual, tactile, olfactory, and kinesthetic perceptions concurrently, it combines various sensory modalities. And these specific values evoke positive feelings and physical and mental

**10** In the context of physical and mental health and hospitals, the recreation potential and the healing properties of Persian garden patterns have been discussed. Mardomi, Karim; Mirhashemi, Sedigheh; Hassanpour, Kasra: "Persian Garden as Healing Garden. An Approach with Islamic Influences". In: *Journal of Researches in Islamic Architecture*, 2 (2015), no. 4, pp. 49–63.

Internet: <http://jria.iust.ac.ir/article-1-110-en.html>, consulted 01.10.2019.

Divandari, Javad; Emamian, Zahra Sadath: *The Role of Structural Elements of Persian Garden in Mental Health*. Internet: [https://www.iioab.org/articles/IIOABJ\\_7.S4\\_21-27.pdf](https://www.iioab.org/articles/IIOABJ_7.S4_21-27.pdf), consulted 01.10.2019.



stimulation. Using our eyes, ears, nose, and whole body to explore the garden produces an overwhelmingly multifaceted sense of place.