

In Search of Eden

MICHAEL GEORGE

The whole width of what was once the Moslem Empire lies between the complete plan in the East and the planting in the West, between the great architectural lay-out of gardens such as the Kashmir Shahjahan Bagh and the Taj Mahal at Agra and the traditional planting of the Generalife at Granada and the Alcazar at Seville. Each country has managed to retain one aspect of the Moslem Paradise Garden.

C M Villiers-Stuart, Spanish Gardens

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the garden, the formerly closed world of horticulture is being disturbed by an outbreak of what Thomas Fischer, senior editor of *Horticulture*, calls "England-bashing." Fischer, who reports on the phenomenon as "one of the more curious developments of recent years," makes this appeal to his readers:

Granted, the slavish imitation of British practices that has been so prevalent in American gardening shows a lack of imagination, and is probably doomed to failure. But though the search for a truly distinctive American style of gardening is a good and necessary one, it would be a pity if, in the process, we were to commit an error of the baby-and-bathwater sort, and ignore all the lessons to be gleaned from the British.

A truly distinctive American style of gardening continues to elude us because it is, ultimately, an illusion. That, at least, was the sense of an all-day symposium on Garden Design in America last winter at the New York

Botanical Garden in the Bronx, as reported in *The New York Times* by Ann Raver. After a full day of "sitting on a hard chair in the old auditorium...trying to figure out what made an American garden American," Raver concluded that "the American garden defies definition." At that same meeting, Sarah Boasberg, identified by Raver as a garden designer from Washington, got everyone off the hook by describing the American garden as "eclectic." By that, according to Raver, "she didn't mean cluttered, or somehow not as good as the real thing. She meant 'selective'...deliberately choosing from elements as diverse as an Islamic water garden from the eighth century or, say, the swimming pools and terraces that the twentieth-century designer Thomas Church created to suit the needs of ordinary people..."

Hovering in the ether above the Bronx on this occasion was the shade of Alexander Pope



Patio de la Acequia, the Generalife, Granada. Oriental domestic architecture is based on the union of house and garden, exemplified in the skillful interweaving of structure and planting at the hillside summer residence of Sultan Ismael (1314-25). The need for irrigation may have largely determined the layout of the patio, the principal courtyard garden around which the villa was built, but the enclosed space is testament to the ingenuity of the Arab engineers and horticulturists who created it. Author's photographs



Patio de los Arreyanes (Patio de la Alberca), the Alhambra, Granada. Within the hilltop citadel built by the Nasrid dynasty that ruled Granada for more than two hundred years there remain four garden courts. Of these the principal and finest is the Patio de los Arreyanes, named for the hedges of myrtle that border the central pool which gave the patio its original name. House and garden were one during the reign of Sultan Yusuf I (1333-54), who built the patio as a court of ablutions through which visitors had to pass to the Torre de Comares, the seat of temporal and spiritual power

(1688-1744), the English poet and garden maven, whose epigrammatic philosophy of landscaping in *Epistle to Burlington* of 1731, which its author referred to as his gardening poem, was pressed into service by Raver, who cited the oft-quoted maxim "Consult the Genius of the Place in all."

Either through correspondence or in a coach, Pope made the rounds of his circle of aristocratic patrons and friends, at whose country houses he was a frequent and welcome guest, collaborating in the landscape schemes of his hosts and placing at their disposal what Horace Walpole called his "exquisite judgment

in the disposition of light and shade." Pope's own garden, at his villa beside the River Thames at Twickenham, became a place of pilgrimage for strangers and friends alike, who regarded it, according to biographer Maynard Mack, "as an example of what could be achieved by using art to imitate and consummate nature's own forms."

This liberated style made famous by William Kent's leaping of the garden fence was based, according to Pope in his *Guardian* essay on landscaping in 1713, on a trust in "the amiable simplicity of unadorn'd Nature." The poet's almost Taoist perception of the world as

informed by an indwelling presence—the Genius of the Place—led to a belief that from a respectful consideration of the natural scene all else would follow. Having helped to free the English countryside from the geometric French and Dutch landscape styles fashionable in his youth, Pope, were he alive today and living in Arizona, no doubt would be “into” xeriscaping, the low-water landscape style that is edging out the English lawn once considered indispensable even in the desert conditions of the American southwest. This is the most valuable of “all the lessons to be gleaned from the British,” worth salvaging, along with Mr Fischer’s baby, in a cup of that old bathwater.

Helpful as is Pope’s Augustan voice in the debate today over the American garden, it sounded too late or from too far away to be heard by those who were hacking a garden path in the unfamiliar terrain of the American continent. As Raver pointed out, “the first colonists were afraid to listen to the spirits of nature.”

Paradisiacal Conceits

It seems clear from the context of Raver’s remarks that the pioneering gardeners she had in mind were those of British origin. Since there is a tendency to overlook the legacy of the Spanish in the United States, it may be surprising to some that in 1992, the year in which we “commemorated the Encounter,” half the population of this country was living in what was once part of Spain. As we get ready to cut the leading strings that still tie us to “the nanny state,” we appear poised to embrace *la madre patria*, whose sons and daughters in the United States will increase in numbers by the year 2000 to an estimated twenty-seven million.

In the new Hispanic day now dawning, and in the fresh spirit of eclecticism advocated by Boasberg and espoused by Raver, it may be useful to take a look at the distinctive but pragmatic gardening experience of Spain, a nation with which the people of the Americas, North and South, share history, culture, language,

and blood. In that vast and various region of the United States, extending from Florida to California, formerly New Spain, are to be found those bewildering contrasts of climate, topography, and vegetation with which horticulturists in the Iberian peninsula have always had to deal.

Although not the most obvious candidate for an award from the gardening world, there is no getting past the flawed figure of Cristóbal Colón (1451-1506), the sometime deckhand and son of a humble weaver. If proof were needed that the Hispanic world is complex, and not reducible to a cultural continuity, it can surely be found in Morison’s *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, first published in 1942, which gives a full accounting of the contradictions in the Columbian mission.

The genuine delight in “the amiable simplicity of unadorn’d Nature” that Columbus felt on sailing into the Bahamas can be gleaned from the pages of his own journal. Of Fortune Island he wrote: “[it] is the most beautiful thing that I have seen, nor can I tire my eyes looking at such handsome verdure, so very different from ours.” As Morison reminded us, every plant the Spanish saw was strange to them, and Columbus, a “hard-nosed mercantilist,” was distressed, as he himself reveals, by his inability to do more than guess at the purely economic value of nature’s bounty on display: “I believe that there are...many plants and many trees which are worth a lot in Spain for dyes, and for medicines of spicery; but I do not recognize them, which gives me great grief.”

Before the enormously consequential plant exchanges set in motion by his subsequent visit, “Columbus often wished that he had shipped a botanist instead of a Hebrew interpreter on this voyage.” Morison also noted in the concluding sentences of the entry made by Columbus on 12 October 1492, “that on the very day of the discovery, the dark thought crossed his mind that these people,” referring to the mainly gentle and generous inhabitants of the Edenic archipelago through which he sailed, “could very easily be enslaved.”

So impressed was Columbus by the island of Hispanola (from *La Isla Española*) that he also

named the part near which he established the first settlement in the New World *Valle del Paraiso* (Valley of Paradise) and the river the *Guadalquivir*, because it reminded him of that famous Andalusian river at Córdoba.

On the eve of his return to Spain, Columbus recorded in his log, on 2 January 1493, that he had “also left seeds for sowing” with the thirty nine men who remained in the fortified enclosure of *La Navidad*. There was no sign of a garden, or, indeed, of these pioneering gardeners, when Columbus, on his second voyage, sought to revisit this lonely outpost. In his absence, what Morison characterized as “the worst traits of cupidity and brutality of the average European” had been unleashed on the peaceable inhabitants of the island, and, in retaliation, it appeared that they had killed all the colonists.

In their rush to judgment, those who rightly criticize Columbus may overlook the strong streak of millenarianism in him, which Morison considered to have been “one of the primary motivations of the Enterprise of the Indies.” From the outset, when he and his crew succeeded, as he thought, in reaching the East by sailing west, what he called the Indies presented intoxicating evidence of Paradise, which, according to the best authorities, lay just below the Equator, and which D’Ailly, the author of *Imago Mundi*, his favorite book, placed at the first point of the Far East, where the sun rose on the day of creation.

If Columbus reached for comparisons with Eden on his first voyage, by August 1498, when he skirted the coast of South America and dimly realized the possibility of a continent unaccounted for in his cosmology, he convinced himself that he had actually found it. As a reader of scripture, Columbus knew for a fact, if not as one of our consoling myths, that “the Lord God planted a garden eastward of Eden...and a river went out of Eden to water the garden: and from thence it was parted, and became four” So, entering the Gulf of Pariah, Columbus experienced an epiphany when he discovered the confluence of four rivers that watered the lush lowland because he believed it to be the source of the river and fountain of paradise in which the

sacred Euphrates, Ganges, Tigris, and Nile had their origin.

In the dire straits in which he found himself on his humiliating return, loaded with chains, from this disastrous third voyage, Columbus did what any latter-day celebrity with an image problem would do: he found himself a press agent. Were he alive today, Gaspar Gorrício, the Carthusian monk who assisted Columbus with the remarkable sales prospectus known as the *Libro de las Profecias*, might object to the odious comparison. But the value of his contribution to this handbook of prophetic writings may be measured by its results. “Indulging,” wrote Morison, “these paradisiacal conceits,” Columbus described his discovery of the Garden of Eden as a fulfillment of biblical prophesy, evidently persuading King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella that, once returned to favor and with cash in hand, he would deliver Jerusalem from the infidel and find King Solomon’s legendary mines.

It is one of the ironic footnotes to garden history that, in November 1500, while he awaited the uncertain outcome of the royal deliberation of his fate, Columbus was detained in the Alhambra, to which the court had moved. The wonder is that, surrounded by gardens that are among the most beautiful in creation, Columbus did not, there and then, give up his quest for the terrestrial paradise halfway around the world.

I Am the Garden

If the Alhambra resonates in the American consciousness today, it may be largely the result of the passionate identification of the nineteenth-century American writer Washington Irving with what he described for the benefit of his contemporaries as “a Moslem pile amidst the Gothic edifices of the West, an elegant memento of a brave, intelligent, and graceful people who conquered, ruled and passed away.” While King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were in awe of the strength and beauty of the defeated enemy citadel in Granada, and, by moving in, actually helped save it for pos-



Pool and principal garden, Castillo de Layos, Toledo. In 1968 Miguel de Oriol e Ybarra resolved to restore the fifteenth-century Castillo de Layos and raise his family there. An example of *Mudejar* workmanship, that is, built by Muslims in Christian employ, the fortified residence was commissioned by Fernando de Rojas on a tract granted by the Catholic Monarchs to their viceroy in Naples. On the site, strategically located near the Roman settlement of Toletum, existed a second-century Roman villa, remnants of which are incorporated into the restored castle and the gardens around it. Free-standing Tuscan columns lend a Hadrianesque touch to the long, narrow changing room that is reminiscent of the *peristilo* and is also Islamic in character. Petunias in planters lend color to the perimeter of the pool

terity, it is not likely that either they or their Christian subjects understood the spiritual significance of what James Dickie called "the last plastic embodiment of this aesthetic in Europe."

Following the capitulation of Boabdil in 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella made a clear statement about their value system by abrogating the treaty of surrender, which was conditioned on the sultan's former subjects being allowed to keep their Islamic faith and

customs. Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros ordered a campaign of forced conversion and mass baptism under threat of torture and imprisonment. And such was their Catholic majesties' fear of the learning that had for the best part of eight centuries distinguished Muslim rule, they permitted the cardinal to make a bonfire in Granada's public square of 80,000 volumes of Islamic literature, among them Hispano-Arabic treatises on agricultural techniques and horticulture.



Principal patio, private residence, Sotogrande, Cadiz. Expressive of the joy of living out of doors, the patio has been reinterpreted by Alfonso Zobel de Ayala at the house he built in 1972 with an elegance that subsumes the lessons of Spain's long garden past. The swimming pool, an indispensable adjunct to life in the country's deep south, has been made the principal element of the garden composition, in much the same way that the central canal was the invariable feature of the Islamic garden on a large scale

Ever since Muhammad had proclaimed the true religion of Abraham in the seventh century, Muslims had posed a triple threat to Christians, religiously, militarily, and economically. In the Middle East, the center of civilization, Muslim entrepreneurs piled up profits from trade with the Far East, which they controlled, in such commodities as spices, which, as food preservatives in an age without refrigeration, had the value of precious metals. Lured by the natural riches of the Orient, and finding passage blocked by the Muslims, Columbus spent ten years scheming to tap into this source of fabulous wealth by sailing west. The triumphant conclusion of their campaign to wrest control of Spain from the Muslims permitted King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to give their attention, and ultimately their backing, to his enterprise.

It has long been held that Spain's Golden Age began, under the Catholic Monarchs, with the territorial expansion, and massive exploitation, in the New World. But there is a good case to be made that it happened earlier, under cultured, inclusive Muslim rule. In such Islamic city states as Córdoba, Sevilla, Toledo, and Granada, learning and commerce flourished as a result of the *convivencia*, a genuine multiculturalism based on cooperation among "the people of the Book" (since, in their various ways, the Bible was holy to each of the three religions).

Ignoring the Koranic warning "Woe be to him who enjoys Paradise in this life," Spain's Islamic rulers set about building in al-Andalus, as they called their new kingdom on earth, those very places of flowing waters, boundless fruit, and, above all, shade, that are promised by Allah to believers. In Islam all arts lead to prayer, and the garden is the supreme expression of Muslim art, permitting the worship of nature as a divine manifestation by harmonizing such elements as water, trees, shrubs, and flowers, all considered sacred. In eighth-century Córdoba the first of Spain's sultans, Abd-ar-Rahman I, began building the Great Mosque at the entrance to which, originally enclosed in about 976 as the Court of Ablutions, one finds the oldest garden in Europe, if not the world. With its central fountain and

connecting stone channels watering formal plantings of palms and the orange trees that give the Patio de los Naranjos its present name, it is reminiscent of the hospitable oasis that was familiar to the people of the desert who created it.

For centuries in Spain the cultivation of a garden, like the possession of precious manuscripts, tapestries, and jewels, formed part of the *vita noble*, with royalty outdoing their subjects. Abd-ar-Rahman I may well have been the first of Spain's gardening princes. The only surviving direct descendant of the Prophet in the Ommayad line, he had a great love of flowers, which Muslims cherished for their color and fragrance, their medicinal properties, and their novelty. He imported a number of Spain's exotic plants, sending to his native Syria, from which he had narrowly escaped with his life, and even to India, for shrubs and seeds never before planted in European soil. It was he who introduced the date palm and the pomegranate (*granada*), the latter adopted as a national emblem after the last Islamic sultanate, for which it was named, was taken from the Muslims in 1492.

In the tenth century, according to Geoffrey King, when "western Europe consisted of little more than Barbarian villages, Muslim Córdoba compared with Constantinople and Baghdad," capitals of the Byzantine and Persian empires, which had also yielded to Islamic rule. A major center of scholarship, in which botany was an important discipline, the University of Córdoba played a leading role in the transmission and extension of classical learning. The most important available Greek treatises on life sciences were translated into Arabic, among them Dioscorides's *Materia medica*. A description of five hundred plants and their pharmaceutical uses, it gained an additional listing of the names of indigenous Spanish plants when translated into Arabic in the ninth century.

Little, if anything, now remains of the great gardens laid out by Abd-ar-Rahman III (912-961) around his court-city of Medinat-az-Zahra on the southern slopes of the Sierra Morena, just three miles from the Great Mosque in Córdoba. Begun in 936 to plans drawn up by architects from Constantinople, this Islamic

Versailles is said to have required the work of ten thousand artisans over a twenty-five-year period; it was destroyed less than a hundred years later. On terraces subdivided into small, rectilinear areas by hedges of clipped box, bay, and myrtle, the gardens were laid out around fountains, pools, and pavilions.

As much of a loss, perhaps, as the pleasure grounds of Medinat-az-Zahra are the fifty thousand gardens that once surrounded Córdoba, whose disappearance became inevitable once the Christians allowed the irrigation system introduced by the Arabs to fall into disuse. Spain's Muslim rulers had given special encouragement to the interwoven arts of agriculture and horticulture by converting vast arid stretches into the *vegas* of Córdoba, Granada, Sevilla, Murcia, and Valencia. A grid of waterways superimposed on the parched plain by ingenious engineers permitted the cultivation of the *huerto*, or orchard, on which depended the more ornamental *jardin*, with its spiritual benefits. Both owed their life to water brought down from the mountains by a network of canals and subterranean reservoirs.

At Hadrian's Villa, the house and garden outside Rome that the Spanish-born emperor established shortly after the beginning of his reign in 117 and was still working on at his death twenty-one years later, Eleanor Clark observed in *Rome and a Villa*, "water was a prime element in architecture...to be given shape, form, like other materials...left flat and still or used in other simple ways on occasion, but preferably more often elaborate in its faces and kinds of motion. It is an element of distance and the undefinable..."

In the Hispano-Arab garden, which reached a peak of perfection in Granada in the fourteenth-century hilltop courtyard gardens of the Alhambra and the Generalife, water was not only vital, it was sacred. As if spurred by the frequency with which it was required by his religion for the purpose of ritual ablution, the Islamic garden architect excelled in the arrangement and distribution of water. Seen, heard, and smelled, it was calculated to appeal to the senses, provoking the inwardness (*ensimismamiento*) that led to communion with the divine.

In its essence the Hispano-Arab garden is an artificial oriental construct in which, in consultation with the Hispanic genius of the place, the Arabs fused elements observed in those older civilizations around the conjectured site of the original Garden of Eden. In the elegant oasis of the paradise garden perfected in sixth-century Sassanid Persia—where paradise was the word for an enclosed space—the conquering Arabs came closest to the terrestrial paradise. In Spain they replicated and refined for their spiritual sustenance the screened Persian plot, with its fragrant and colorful interplanting of fruit trees, signifying renewal, and the beloved evergreen cypress of immortality. At the crux of this geometric pattern reposed the same fountain and four radiating rivers, symbolic of the Edenic confluence, which Columbus thought he had found on the shores of South America.

Had Columbus been aware of the typological antecedents of the Patio de los Leones, which he probably paced in the winter of 1500, this fallen Adam might well have regained paradise in the artful reworking of the Sassanid formula by Sultan Muhammad V (1354-59 and 1362-91): the axial channels from the famous Fuente de los Leones then almost certainly conducting water through a Persian carpet of flowers covering the four compartments associated with the basic elements of earth, water, fire, and air.

It is hard to believe that, in the contiguous Palacio de Comares, built by Sultan Yusuf I (1333-54), Columbus was not transported to paradise by the reverberating reflections in the still water (*agua estatica*) of the long, central pool that gave its name to the Patio de la Alberca, now more often called the Patio de los Arreyanes for the two long, green bands of fragrant myrtle with which it is hedged. Or that the murmur of the low-lying tributary fountains at either end did not induce in the seafarer, as the sound of water here is intended to do, a state of trance or meditation in which he was laid to sleep in body to become a living soul. Instead, it seems, so preoccupied was Columbus with his millenarian quest for paradise on the other side of the globe, he was unable to experience it in the simulacrum of

Patio de las Naranjas, Cordoba. Begun in 784-86 by Sultan Abd ar-Rahman I, the Great Mosque, an astonishing work of architecture, symbolized the political and religious power of the newly emergent Muslim state in Spain. This partial view from the former minaret of the Mezquita shows the enclosed garden, oriental in origin and urban in character, built as the Court of Ablutions, considered the oldest garden in Europe



Eden right under his nose.

Like the deluded "discoverer" five hundred years ago, a secular gardening community in America in the late twentieth century, however eclectic it tries to be, may have difficulty appreciating the work of the Hispano-Arab garden artist. In an article in the *New York Times* on the earliest surviving garden of the Nazrid dynasty in Granada, built by Sultan Ismael (1314-25), American writer Caroline Seebohm recently warned, "There are people who are dismayed by the overall display of geometry and discipline expressed in the Generalife, particularly those brought up to appreciate the blowsy borders of English cottage gardens. But the Generalife's intricately constructed spaces are a hymn to the Moorish view of landscape design, where elegant lines, the play of light and shade, vistas, and the constant presence of water not only assured the continuing abundance of this life-giving current, but also reflected the desire to celebrate the garden as an earthly paradise."

The Islamic garden occupied a lofty position (a possible meaning of *Generalife*) in the Spanish landscape in which it was made because it was given pride of place in the coherent world view that shaped it. Inscribed in Arabic on the wall of one of the chambers surrounding the Patio de los Leones are these words by the fourteenth-century poet Ibn Zamrak:

I am the garden, I awake adorned in beauty
Gaze on me well, know what I am like.
What a delight for the eyes!
The patient man who looks here realizes
his desires.

As the supreme expression of mankind's
aspiration to regain the high ground of Eden

before the Fall, the Hispano-Arab garden is worthy of our deepest feelings of admiration and affection. With greater understanding of the lessons to be learned, the tradition may prove to be an appropriate source of inspiration for the Anglophiles among us. ♪

[Michael George's photographs appear in *The Gardens of Spain* published this fall by Abrams.]