

The Gardens of Paradise: Hudson Valley Landscapes

By Mark Gilliland

I can still recall my first drive along Broadway (Rt. 9) - being totally wowed by local estates such as Sunnyside and Lyndhurst. Further north along both sides of the Hudson valley lie even grander estates, once homes to industrial barons and famous painters. The architectural styles of these estates embody a range of European and oriental influences. Their gardens display both naturalistic and formal planting design: alleés of trees, paths and rolling hills accented with jewel-like Parterre knot gardens full of flowering annuals.

How did this fascinating potpourri of the Hudson Valley landscape style come into being? Please join with me in an armchair tour of landscape design history leading up to the grand estates built in the Hudson Valley during the 1800s.

The date? 2200BC. The place? Sumeria. This (fig. 1) is one of the earliest known artifacts recording human activity of gardening. Interpretations of the depicted scene vary – it might be a walled triangular garden or perhaps a stepped ziggurat (pyramid) with terraced planting levels. In either case, horticultural activity such as this could only be supported by technological advances such as irrigation and scientific advances such as accurate solar calendars.

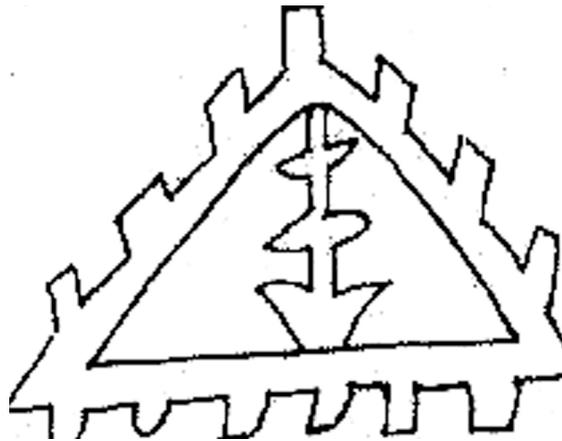


figure 1

The most famous early garden in historical records is the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (fig. 2) built into the walls of the city as a cascade of terraces. Only a few depictions of the Gardens have survived.



figure 2

This Assyrian seal (fig. 3) iconographically shows the garden: look closely and you can discern row plantings of trees, shrubs and flowers or vegetables surrounded by paths, with a central fountain to provide a source of irrigation.

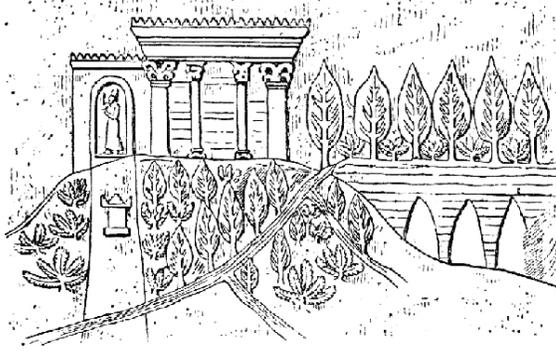


figure 3

garden was a place of spiritual reflection. A place of cool shade. Sounds of flowing water and wildlife. This other-worldly abundance is the essence of the Paradise Garden.

Most of what we know about these early Paradise Gardens comes from rug and tapestry fragments. The typical rug pattern (fig. 4) was based upon the layout of the walled Paradise Garden. Analysis of the plants shown in these rug designs has provided detailed information as to what trees were actually cultivated (often imported from distant lands): pine, cypress, poplar, plane (sycamore), oak, maple, fruit and nut trees (almond).

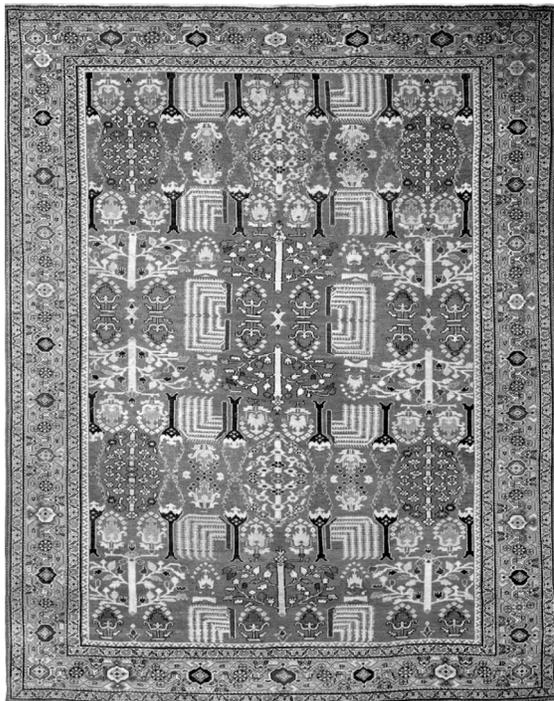


figure 4

Our story's historical thread continues thru Persia and other Arabic cultural centers - cities often located in harsh, arid environments. Water was a sign of wealth as it had to be delivered from the distant mountains via underground aqueducts termed "qanat." Gardens were walled for protection from the elements, full of exotic flowering and edible plants. Trees for shade. Fruit and nut trees. Fountains and pools of water. Mist cooled air. A place of fertility, abundance. Floral scents. The

The plan of the Paradise Garden shows a central four quadrant structure with a water feature (fountain) in the middle and paths radiating out in a grid pattern. Water flows in pools and narrow "rills"; there are rows of trees for shade, flower and vegetable beds, with everything enclosed in high walls. The garden layout could be expanded by simply repeating the basic quadrant grid, extending water channels to flow north, south, east and west (fig. 5). Smaller paradises give way to larger paradises.

The Arabic style of the Paradise Garden entered Europe thru influence of the Moors in the Iberian peninsula: 711 A.D. is a very important date in Landscape History. It is the year the Syrian Arabs invaded Spain, bringing Middle Eastern architecture and culture to the European continent. The Moors ruled Spain until Granada fell to the Christians in 1492.

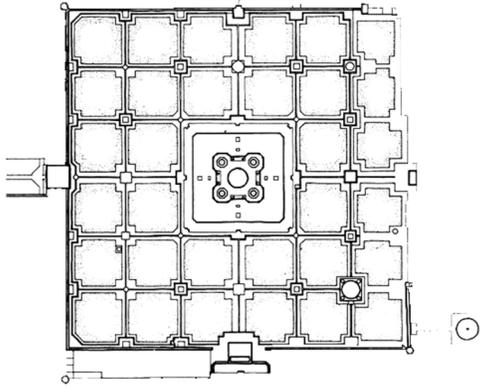


figure 5

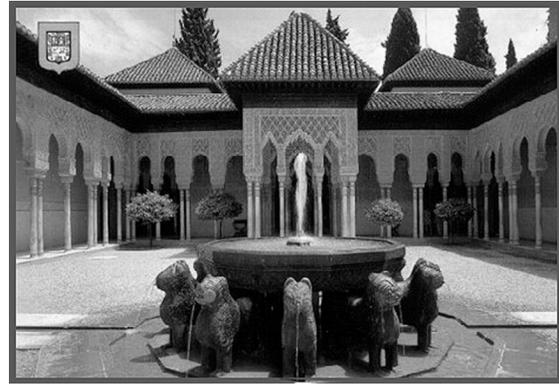


figure 6

Perhaps most important garden of the time was Alhambra Palace in Granada. The grand Lion Court (fig. 6) contained a central water feature - the Lion Fountain. Flower beds were depressed below the level of walkways so that the flower heads bloomed at footstep level – a literal “carpet of flowers.” Alhambra embodied the true Paradise Garden in its colorful tile work; water channels (rills), fountains, and pools; varied, often exotic plant materials; garden rooms with connecting paths (fig. 7).

Persian garden design traveled across Europe from Moorish Spain into the Christian domains of Spain, Italy and France. In the 1500’s, Villa D’Este was built by Cardinal Ippolito at Tivoli, outside of Rome. Villa D’Este is a landscape that tells a story not just about the display of wealth and power but also about principles learned from past civilizations. Great pools and water courses (modified rills) feed magical fountains which spray over the ever-present sculptures of Greek and Roman mythical themes (fig. 8). Here, then, garden is once again seen as a microcosm of the civilized world, often filled with exotic, newly discovered plants from far-off lands.



figure 7



figure 8

The grand landscapes of Italy found fertile competition in the 17th century estates of the French Aristocracy. Andre LeNotre, the most famous of the French designers, built the gardens at Villandry for a high court noble. The wonder of Villandry was said to have

made King Luis XIV so jealous that LeNotre feared for his life. He was determined to make for Luis XIV the grandest of all gardens at Versailles palace (fig. 9).

The Versailles landscape can be seen as consisting of two disparate design elements brought into harmony: the “bosque” - naturalistic wooded areas with paths, grottos, seating (fig. 10); and the more formal geometric areas with intersecting walkways, grand steps, pools, fountains, sculpture and “parterre” flower beds (fig. 11).



figure 9



figure 10



figure 11

Formal French design is the summit of the Grand Baroque style. It is a show of Man’s domination over Nature. Everything was of monumental scale and rich and lavishly decorated, exuberant yet well-ordered. Still hints of the Persian garden can be seen in the great reflecting pools which bisect the grounds, dividing the view into symmetrical parts, an alleé of trees line either side. Elsewhere, the parterre beds of the estate’s large kitchen potage gardens were laid out in the familiar nested quadrant grid of the Paradise Garden.

With the Age of Exploration and Conquest came the Physick Garden in England, an encyclopedic horticultural enterprise aimed at growing and cataloging the medicinal and herbal properties of exotic plants gathered from around the world. Consider the rapid pace of change that resulted: 1621 - Oxford Botanical Garden founded, 1670 - glass houses invented, 1673 - Chelsea Physick Gardens founded, 1730s – first seed catalogs printed, 18th century – first college of botany opens its doors. (The Physick Gardens were

laid out in the familiar nested quadrant grid of the Paradise Garden, but with sculptural accents rather than fountains, and dirt paths replacing rills of flowing water.)



figure 12

England, too, imported the Grand Baroque landscape style for its grand estates – such as Hampton Court (fig. 12), the palace of King Henry VIII. But for more modest properties, a folksy, informal style (ultimately to become known as the “cottage garden”) persisted. Such subsistence gardens typically consisted of raised beds and fenced walls, planted with a functional mix of herbs, vegetables and flowers.

The dawn of the 18th century brought Neoclassicism to England and with it, the beginnings of English Landscape Painting. With the end of civil strife, plagues and social turmoil, the landed aristocracy had time to think about beauty and philosophy once again.

Neoclassicism was England's reaction against the ornate trappings of the Baroque. Instead of Man walling off the excess of Wild Nature, Neoclassic poetry and painting spoke of Nature as Beauty for its own sake, as a great and wondrous parkland to enjoy. Landscapes were romantically stylized and filled with fake ancient temples and Roman ruins (termed “follies” - fig. 13.) Views of the distant, rolling landscape were incorporated into design vistas (fig. 14), resulting in an all-encompassing naturalistic approach which integrated the entire landscape into the expansive Picturesque Vision.



figure 13



figure 14

Key to this romantic view of landscape was the notion of “genius loci” - or spirit of place. The new breed of English landscape designers who tried to capture this unique spirit included William Kent, Capability Brown, Humphrey Kepton, William Robinson and Christopher Lloyd, many of whom traveled thru Italy and France to experience firsthand the genius loci of famous historical gardens as well as Roman and Greek ruins.

Now comes the time in our narrative history for us to take sail across the Atlantic to the New World and the lands of the English Colonies. Early gardens in the colonies were typically unstructured, informal, functional – much like the ones found in villages of the home country. These were potage gardens geared towards subsistence and survival.



figure 15



figure 16



figure 17

However, in the developing urban centers such as Colonial Williamsburg we begin to find a very English mix of informal potage gardens and formal Parterre plantings such as that at the Governor's Palace with its traditional "bedding out" of annuals and its refined strolling gardens (fig. 15).

In the 18th century, the grounds of University of Virginia and Monticello were designed by Thomas Jefferson, heavily influenced by his study of classical architecture themes. Yet these reveal a less aristocratic, more egalitarian, style and scale appropriate to the new democracy. The result was often quite functional and inventive as in the single brick thick Serpentine Walls behind the Great Lawn (fig. 16). The walls, now planted with trees, shrubs and perennials, were actually intended to divide land into potage garden plots for each resident scholar.

The 19th century, especially in New England, ushered in the rise of the Rural Cemetery Movement: in 1831, work on Mt. Auburn Cemetery (in the Boston countryside) was begun (fig. 17). It was envisioned not only as a cemetery but as a park (influenced by Pierre La Chasse Cemetery in Paris), to serve as an escape from the urban noise, pollution and density of the city -- to be open to anyone (rich or poor) who could afford transportation to its gates. When first developed, sections of the overall plan were offered to leading artists, architects and landscape designers of the day for their unique designs. The resulting park-like environment is considered to be the beginnings of the public parks movement in the U.S.

The first major American landscape designers included Andrew Jackson Downing and Fredrick Law Olmstead who studied the English Romantic esthetic closely. Olmstead, walking across England, toured many private estate gardens and landscapes with their sequence of picturesque views: encounters with temple follies, statuary, springs and grottos, all involving layers of visual, literary, and personal allusion, reflected in a calm body of water. Olmstead came to believe that one must always remain conscious of nature and learn from the inherent beauty all around – what he termed “Naturalism.”

Probably the most famous of the urban parks created in 1800s is Central Park in New York City. Fredrick Law Olmstead & Calvert Vaux worked on this project as a team. (Vaux was a French landscape architect brought in because he had more public project experience than Olmstead). The park combines both formal elements (fountains, plazas, alleés – fig. 18) and naturalistic elements (walks thru woods and curvilinear meadows - fig. 19). Olmstead enhanced the feeling of naturalism of the park by keeping vehicular and horse traffic out of view through extensive use of sunken roadways and berms.



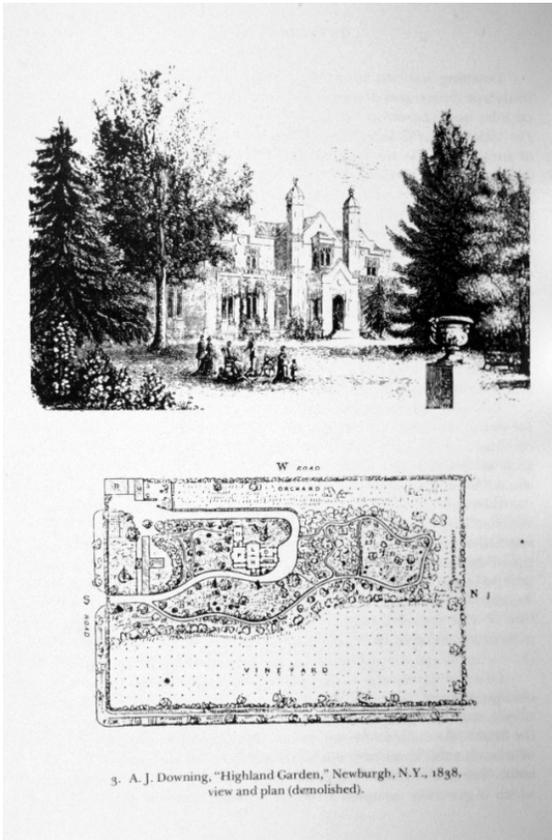
figure 18



figure 19

Andrew Jackson Downing was perhaps the most influential landscape architect of 19th century. He helped shape the fabric of the Hudson Valley during the rise of its great country estates through the creation and publication of a series of Pattern Books which presented plans for various historical styles of mansions/houses. Included with these were estate plans and plant lists for associated landscape and gardens (fig. 20). His cookbook “Picturesque Landscapes” were a hybrid of the free-flowing English naturalistic style combined with more formal display beds close to the house, typically at the front or rear entrances.

Downing soon became known as the “Apostle of Taste,” almost single handedly defining and creating the suburb movement - moving out of the congestion of the city to one’s own country estate (no matter how large or small). The new railroad along the river helped with this opening up of the Hudson Valley; commuting was now within the grasp of the emerging middle class urban dweller. Soon everyone would dream of owning their own Paradise Garden on the Hudson.



3. A. J. Downing, "Highland Garden," Newburgh, N.Y., 1838, view and plan (demolished).

Inspired to work on your own garden paradise? Here are a few places to go for high-quality, new and unusual stuff:

- Rudolph's Gardens** **845.277.4874**
Carmel, NY

- Pound Ridge Nursery** **914.764.5781**
Pound Ridge, NY

- Kolvek's Perennials** **845.735.2904**
Chestnut Ridge, NY

- Rosedale Nursery** **914.769.1300**
Hawthorne, NY

- Matterhorn Nursery** **845.354.5986**
Spring Valley, NY

- Mountain Maples** **888.707.6522**
(mail order – CA.)

figure 20

Mark Gilliland is Landscape Designer certified by the New York Botanical Garden and is also a Cornell Master Gardener. His landscape design business is Garden Artistry. For more information: www.garden-artistry.com - Phone: 914.714.3056