

## The Exotic Garden in the Song of Songs

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See Also: [\*Landscapes of the Song of Songs: Poetry and Place\*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2017).

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April 2018

Arguably more than any other biblical text, the Song of Songs is saturated with imagery relating to the natural world, including, for example, vineyards (1:6, 14; 2:15; 7:13; 8:11, 12), fields (1:7-8; 2:7; 3:5; 7:12), and gardens (4:12-5:1; 6:2, 11; 8:13, 14). The Song is therefore an important text for exploring ancient conceptualizations of land, although it has rarely been read with that sustained emphasis.

One landscape of particular prominence in the Song is the garden. Reading your way through the Song, you will stumble upon a garden at nearly the center (Song 4:12-15; the translation that follows is mine):

A locked garden, my sister bride,  
A locked garden, a sealed spring.  
Your shoots are an orchard:  
Pomegranate with excellent fruits,  
Henna with nard,  
Nard and saffron,  
Cane and cinnamon  
With all kinds of incense trees,  
Myrrh and eaglewood  
With all the prime spices.  
A garden fountain, a well of living water,  
And flowing from Lebanon.

This poem details the various elements of the garden, including its plant life and its irrigation

system. The description, with its detailed list of ten plant names, showcases an intrinsic interest in the natural landscape under the auspices of intensification.

Of the ten plants listed, four arguably grew in the region of ancient Israel/Palestine: pomegranates, henna, saffron, balsam, and ginger grass. The pomegranate is a tree not only native, but pervasively grown, and so frequently called upon in biblical literature as an emblem of the fruitfulness of ancient Israel. The remainder of the list, however, evokes costly spices that were known predominantly as imports: spikenard, cinnamon, frankincense, myrrh, and eaglewood (see discussion in James, 68). The scholarly consensus is that, because of the diversity of plants it contains, the garden represents a fantasy. For example, Cheryl Exum writes that “[n]o garden in the ancient Near East would have contained such a wide variety of spice-bearing plants and trees from such far-away places as Arabia, Africa, and India, growing side by side” (177). Similarly, Michael Fox writes, “[t]his can only be a fantasy garden of exotic and precious plants” (138; cf. Gerleman, 159). There is a two-fold problem with such readings: first, as a label, “fantasy garden” is not particularly helpful because it merely states the redundancy that this is a poem and not an actual garden; second, it does not take into account how exoticism, the incorporation of foreign elements into the domestic, is a persistent and traditional aspect of gardening in idea and practice. Both textual representations and archaeological remains reveal how integral exotic plant elements were to the ancient Near Eastern garden.

### Garden Exoticism in the Ancient Near East

Garden exoticism is evident across the ancient world. The practices of curating horticultural exotica can be traced in texts and, in some cases, through analysis of botanical remains. In Mesopotamia, royal inscriptions offer a glimpse into the priority of exotica as part of the promulgation of kingly competence. For example, in an Assyrian cylinder inscription, Tiglath Pileser I (1115-1077 BCE) lists the cities he has subdued, the territories he controls, the

wild animals he has hunted, and the exotic garden he has established: “Cedars and urkarinu-trees, and allakanish-trees ... I took, and in the gardens of my land, I planted them. And rare garden-fruits, which were not found within my land. ... [I]n the gardens of Assyria I have caused them to flourish” (Budge 91). Several hundred years later, Sennacherib (705-681 BCE) makes repeated claims to creating a great park at Ninevah. In several inscriptions, the incorporation of exotic plants is emphasized: “all the herbs of the land of Hatti (Syria), myrrh-plants, among which fruitfulness was greater than in their (natural) habitat, all kinds of mountain-vines, all the fruits of (all) lands, herbs and fruit-bearing trees I set out for my subjects,” (Luckenbill 113; cf. 111). The inscriptions emphasize the array of plant species, including myrrh, an aromatic that is also listed in the Song of Songs, which was native to the horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Exoticism here is seen to be part of an ambitious program of garden building. That the myrrh and other plants will flourish in Sennacherib’s garden is not an indicator that such a garden was a fantasy or impossibility, but that its achievement was a token of horticultural success.

Continuing this tradition of incorporating foreign elements, Assurnasirpal II’s building project at Kalhu (Nimrud, 876 BCE) included gardens filled with exotica that came both from foreign tribute, and from military expeditions. He boasts about this interest in elaborate detail:

From the lands I travelled and hills I traversed the trees and seeds I noticed and collected: cedar, cypress, box, *Juniperus oxycedrus*, myrtle, *Juniperus dupracea*, almond, date palm, ebony, sissou, olive, tamarind, oak, terebinth, dukdu (nut tree), *Pistacia terebinthus*, myrrh-type (ash?), mehru-fir, Dead Sea fruit(?), ti’atu, Kaniš-oak, willow, ṣadānu, pomegranate, plum, fir, ingirašu, pear, quince, fig, grapevine, angašu-pear, ṣumlalu, titip (aromatic), ṣarbutu, zanzaliqu (acacia?), “swamp-apple”-tree, ricinus, nuhurtu, tazzinū, kanaktu. (Wiseman 142)

Following this description of exotic plants, Assurnasirpal’s description continues with an affirmation of the aesthetic experience of the garden:

The canal-water came flowing down from above to the gardens: the paths [are full] of scent; the waterfalls [glisten] like the stars of heaven in the garden of pleasure. The

pomegranate trees, which are clothed with clusters of fruit like vines, enrich the breezes in the garden of [delights. I] Assurnasirpal gather fruit continuously in the garden of joys... (Wiseman 142)

The sensory experiences of the garden, full of its array of exotic and fruiting plants, is here lushly evoked. These rich aesthetic possibilities are reinforced by the three-fold title given to the space: “the garden of pleasure,” “the garden of delights,” and “the garden of joys.” Like the garden passage in the Song of Songs, the list of plants conveys the ordered and encompassing totality of the horticultural exotica, accompanied by an affirmation of their aesthetic value. These examples serve to show that exoticism itself was understood as a cultural achievement in the ancient world, one worth boasting about.

The high cultural value on exotic horticulture can also be traced in Egypt. For example in the “Botanical Garden” reliefs of pharaoh Thutmose III (ca. 1479-1425 BCE) at Karnak render in exceptional detail a visual catalogue of horticultural and zoological gains from his extensive military campaigns: “Plants which His Majesty found in the Land of Retenu ... All the plants that grow, all flowers that are in God’s Land,” (Beaux 39-40).



**[Photo 1 caption. Botanical Garden" reliefs of Pharaoh Thutmose III. Credit: Wikipedia]**

There are obstacles to certain identification of the plants represented, since color has faded from the walls of this temple, and the plants are not differentiated by relative size but all appear in like dimensions; however, it is still possible to identify some of the plants depicted. These include: date and doum palm, sycamore-fig, common fig, pomegranate, vine, waterlily, iris, melon, and lettuce; likely are arum, crown daisy, teasel, bindweed, and myrtle, among many others (Wilkinson 138). Among the plants, twenty-six represent exotic species (Beaux 213). The style accomplishes visually what Assurnasirpal's boast accomplishes literarily: it impresses the viewer with the sense of accomplishment. The exoticism is brought into relief by the sheer size of the collection, which is arranged to showcase the variety of specimens, including a large number of exotic and rare species alongside elements chosen to evoke the Egyptian environment. In this way, the paintings depict the integration of the exotic within the familiar.

In another Egyptian example, Eighteenth Dynasty Egyptian Pharaoh Hatshepsut's (1508-1458 BCE) funerary temple at Deir el Bahri was decorated with elaborate reliefs depicting her expedition to the land of Punt, including depictions of workers transporting whole trees with their roots in baskets. This venture is also described in her annals: "... I made for [the Lord of the Gods] a Punt in his garden..." and the dug pits are still evident archaeologically at the site of the Deir el Bahri mortuary complex (Carroll 42-43). This venture was echoed later by Pharaoh Ramesses III (1186-1155 BCE), who imported incense and myrrh trees to Memphis (Breasted 4: 333). As should be clear from the foregoing examples, gardens of every era in the ancient Near East evidence "the controlled coexistence of exotic and indigenous flora and fauna," (Foster 321). Israel's neighbors on both sides clearly practiced the cultivation of horticultural diversity.

Recent archaeological discoveries at Ramat Rachel provide archaeobotanical evidence of precisely the kind of garden exoticism evoked in the Song of Songs. During the 2005-07 excavation seasons of this hilltop just south of Jerusalem, researchers discovered an elaborate series of plastered pools, drains, and stone-built channels to the west of a large palace structure (Lipschits).



**[Photo 2 caption. Plastered pool at Ramat Rachel. Photo: Wikipedia.]**

These waterways seem to have channeled and stored rainwater for a lowered garden carved into the hillside. New techniques have allowed the fossilized pollen trapped in the layers of plaster in the waterways themselves to be analyzed. While some of the plaster layers contain largely native plant species, the Persian period layer shows a large number of exotic species, including willow and poplar, which would have required extensive irrigation; citron, Persian walnut, cedar, and birch trees; and ornamentals such as myrtle and water lilies. These exotic species appear to have been grown along with native species, including the grape vine, the common fig, and the olive (Langgut, 120, 123-126). The success of this wide variety of species would have required extensive preparation: the natural flint outcrops were hewn to create the lowered garden, in which the bedrock was overlaid with a layer of rich, imported earth (likely from the valley of

Repha'im, west of Ramat Rachel) nearly 40 cm thick. Such alterations constitute an impressive transformation of a once-rocky hilltop into an exotic garden. It seems, then, that the Song is consciously evoking a pervasive ancient gardening practice by describing exotic elements in its central garden text. It is not quite right, then, to say that this is merely a "fantasy garden." Instead, we should ask: what desires and ideals does this exoticism promote?

### Meaning and Value in the Garden

As a constructed space closely related to agriculture, the garden both refers to and contains nature, but it is not nature per se. The garden, rather, is a cultural form that serves as a microcosm for ideals about the natural world (Tuan 21). The examples drawn from above largely come from royal contexts, in which exoticism expresses an ideology of imperial prerogative and extent. As Foster writes, "Many rulers saw acquisition and display of exotic flora and fauna as effective ways to enhance prestige or to demonstrate imperial dominion over far-flung lands" (320). It is certainly the case that ancient gardens, particularly elaborate royal "pleasure gardens," can promote propagandistic imperial ideologies, and there are biblical examples of such royal gardens (e.g., Est 1:5; 2 Kgs 25:4; Jer 39:4; 52:7; Neh 3:15; 2 Kgs 21:18, 26). It is tempting to conclude that such was the ideological function of all exotic gardens, and therefore also of the garden text in the Song of Songs. But it must be remembered that much evidence for gardening in the ancient world has come from the relatively permanent evidence in royally-sponsored inscriptions, literature, paintings, and garden sites. Lasting artifacts are most frequently produced by centers of power. At the same time, actual gardens are ephemeral art forms whose remains disappear from most records. Smaller-scale kitchen gardens, which were doubtless the most pervasive garden forms in the ancient world (as they are in the contemporary world) leave far fewer traces. While references to royal gardens point to the high art of garden practice, gardens are also, pervasively, universally, a popular craft (Zoh, 56). So it is difficult to

say with complete conviction that the exotic garden exclusively connotes imperial ideologies.

There is, rather, a profusion of meanings that inhere in gardens. In the ancient Near East, for example, the garden would have had a principally utilitarian purpose as a space for intensive food production. Evidence for this includes, for example, the Roman and Egyptian kitchen garden, which would have served the immediate needs of the household (Taylor 5; Burford). Vegetables, which have soft tissues that are eaten fresh (often before the plant sets its seed), leave little archaeological trace, but they were likely grown in garden plots. The Sumerians, for example, developed a strategy of shade-gardening by surrounding small plots with date-palm trees, which would shelter the relatively vulnerable vegetable crops from both intense sun and strong winds (Renfrew 1: 192). These plots would have produced staples such as peas, beans, and lentils, but also garlic and probably also leeks, cucumbers, lettuces, melons, and a variety of native and non-native spices. This pattern of gardening in small-scale plots near households for the production of pulses along with a variety of vegetables and fruits would have supplied protein and vitamins as crucial supplements to cereal production. This basic utilitarian function of the garden can also intersect with a variety of other cultural meanings. Gardens can model aesthetic pleasure, accommodate mortuary spaces, create religious meanings by hosting and symbolizing sacral and ritual rites of various kinds, or, as in the case of the Mesopotamian love poems in particular, emblemize human sexuality and fertility (James 62-65). Of course, several of these meanings can converge in a single garden space. To cite a striking example, an Egyptian poem from the Cairo Love Songs employs familiarity with the kind of garden exoticism discussed above, but removed from an imperial context. The vase fragments containing these poems were discovered at Deir el-Medina, which was a craftsmen's village (Westenholz). It suggests that, as in the Song of Songs, knowledge of such botanical exoticism could also be employed to other ends:

If only my sister were mine every day,

like the greenery of a wreath! ...  
The reeds are dried,  
the safflower has blossomed,  
the mrbb-flowers are (in) a cluster(?).  
The lapis-lazuli plants and the mandragoras have come forth.

[The blo]ssoms from Hatti have ripened,  
the bsbs-tree bloss[omed],...  
the willow tree greened.  
She would be with me every day,  
like (the) greenery of a wreath.  
All the blossoms are flourishing in the meadow,  
... entirely. (Breasted 4: 333)

The safflower (a semiticism), and the “blossoms from Hatti” mark exotic species. The evocation of exoticism within a non-royal context is suggestive of universal practices of seed-saving and seed-trading. The young man expresses a wish to preserve the fleeting abundance of these exotic species in a wreath in order to enjoy them every day—not just when they are blossoming in the meadow: “She would be with me every day, / like (the) greenery of a wreath.” The poet uses known practices of horticultural exoticism to convey an idea about the lasting nature of love by capitalizing on the fragile ephemerality of the exotic plants. In this love poem, as well as in the royal boasts about garden accomplishments, there is an underlying recognition that exotic species can be especially susceptible to failure—so their success alongside native plants is a prized cultural value. Exoticism, therefore, is possible only through a series of cultural commitments and ideals, including (but not limited to) travel, botanical interest and knowledge, and, perhaps most importantly, horticultural skill.

The logic of the garden exoticism in the Song, then, persuades the reader not that the garden is a “fantasy garden,” but that the space is the result of attention and care—one that presumes the intervention of a skilled gardener. The logic of the list heads the description with the pomegranate, arguably the fruit most emblematic of the region, and suggests that this garden contains groves in which other high quality fruits are equally as successful (v. 13). The insistence

on the success of both native and exotic species continues in the text's pairings: henna (native) with nard (exotic); nard (exotic) and saffron (native); cane (native) and cinnamon (exotic; v. 14); myrrh and eaglewood (exotic). The diverse range of specimens in the garden is twice indicated by affirmations of the garden's abundance: "with all kinds of incense trees" (v. 14); "with all the prime spices" (v. 15). While the list gives a striking array of plant names, it is also intent to create the feeling that we are only scratching the surface. The close interweaving of these native and exotic plant names suggests that the poem is interested in how the plants—both native and exotic—flourish together in a single garden. Their ability to do so is another striking "signature of human agency" without which a garden cannot exist (Harrison 7).

Other signatures of human intervention leave unmistakable traces in this passage: the garden is described primarily with passive participles: it is "locked," and "sealed" (4:12). These passive participles imply a hidden agent who has actively structured the garden and whose work remains a defining feature of the space. They denote an intervention in nature that serves the needs of humans and symbolizes long-term investment in a particular place: even after the maker has disappeared, the results of horticultural craft remain. Similarly, the watercourses that appear here indicate irrigation techniques. These "springs" would have been crucial to the ancient levantine garden, and their significance is pointed up by the way they frame the passage. The description of the exotic garden begins with a spring: "a locked garden, a sealed spring," and ends with a parallel phrase, "a garden spring" (vv. 12, 15). Such springs likely evoke irrigation practices such as the plastered waterways discovered at Ramat Rachel, discussed above. The most obvious marker of human intervention is of course the presence of people in the garden, which become more prominent in the lines that follow:

Awake, O north wind!  
And come, O south wind!  
Blow upon my garden  
That its fragrance may be wafted abroad.  
Let my beloved come to his garden,

And eat its choice fruits.  
I come to my garden, my sister bride;  
I gather my myrrh with my spice,  
I eat my honeycomb with my honey,  
I drink my wine with my milk.  
Eat, friends, drink!  
And be drunk with love. (4:16-5:1)

The culmination of the exotic garden, its ultimate purpose, is human pleasure.

The exotic garden in the Song of Songs is not merely a fantasy of lovers, but a study in the human relationship to the natural world. The “nature” of the garden in the Song is not simply “natural,” but is a highly specified and refined cultural form that celebrates the human role as the promoter and beneficiary of the natural world. It promotes the significance of human care, which makes the existence of the garden possible, as well as the enjoyment of the flourishing plants—both domestic, and exotic.

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