

The Local and the Global: The Flora of the Israeli Garden

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The floral palette of the Israeli garden is a rich and diverse mosaic, reflecting the mosaic of the country's population. Indigenous species mentioned in the Bible bloom alongside species that were introduced hundreds of years ago and are considered residents, as well as new introductions from around the world (Helphand, 2002). This floral palette is not incidental, but is the product of the development of the Israeli garden culture. A culture shaped by ideology, politics, economy and society.

This paper characterises the floral palette of the Israeli garden from the beginning of the twentieth century to date, examining the relationship between its local and global components. The examination of design proposals and existing gardens enables us to discuss the connection between the Israeli garden's flora and aspects relating to culture development, local identity and the politics of its formation.

THE HEBREW GARDEN PROJECT was a part of the development of a comprehensive Hebrew culture for the Jewish immigrants to Palestine – Land of Israel.¹ Generally speaking, two competing cultural options served as alternatives in the emergence of the new Hebrew culture. The first emphasised the Hebrew tradition and the nation's roots, while the second emphasised the adaptation of the Western culture to the local environment and language (Shavit, 1980). The adoption of the local flora as a framework for the new Hebrew garden is regarded as representing the first option, while the use of introduced or acclimatised species represents the second.

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Israeli garden culture
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Politics of landscape

By the beginning of the twentieth century various cultural agents found it relatively easy to promote the use of the local flora in decorative gardens, since it was mentioned in the Bible and had a special significance for the new settlers. The painter Halevi, in a proposal for the city of Tel Aviv's central park (1930), created a miniature model of the local landscape (Halevi, 1933). The vegetation repertoire included local trees such as the palm tree (*Phoenix dactylifera*), the fig (*Ficus carica*), the olive (*Olea europea*), the carob (*Ceratonia siliqua*), the local oak (*Quercus calliprino*) and the almond (*Prunus amygdalus*), all situated as if in their natural habitats.

Concurrently, other cultural agents strongly recommended the assimilation of a universal repertoire of plants, similar to the assimilation of global repertoires in other cultural fields. The proposal of the gardener-architect Segal, relating to the same garden, included more than 60 species, most of them new introductions (Segal archive).

In general, the local professional community supported the global perspective:

There is no need to create a Hebrew garden based on a narrow nationalistic approach, that is, dreaming about a garden based on the seven Biblical species. It is time to free

oneself from such restrictive constraints, which limit the possibilities of progress in garden art. (Weinberg-Oren, 1943)

Local municipalities, nurseries and research institutions shared the desire to expand the appropriate flora for gardening, as well as for other purposes such as afforestation, land reclamation, timber processing and others (which are beyond the scope of this paper). They followed the first experiments, conducted in Mikveh Israel (the first Hebrew agricultural school, founded in 1870) and in Aharonson's agricultural station in Atlit (1910), which acclimatised various kinds of trees and plants. With the establishment of the British authorities' civil governance in 1920, a systematic process of acclimatisation commenced (Bigger and Liphshitz, 1998). With the help of the Zionist Federation, new arboretums and experimental plots were planted with hundreds of species brought from all over the British Empire.

After the establishment of the State of Israel (1948), plant introductions flourished because of global trade, the development of new plant acclimatisation techniques and massive immigration to Israel from around the world. This resulted in the creation of the current Israeli garden as a mix of various plants in which less than ten percent (300, as compared with 4,000) are local species (Galon, 1993). These native plants are assigned to sites of symbolic importance, such as historical and commemorative gardens and places of national significance.

Avraham Karavan enveloped the Memorial Hall (1965) for Tel Aviv's fallen warriors with a dense vegetation of local species. By creating a 'nature-like' environment, Karavan revived the allegory that connected the dominance of the local vegetation with the emergence of the new Jewish nation.

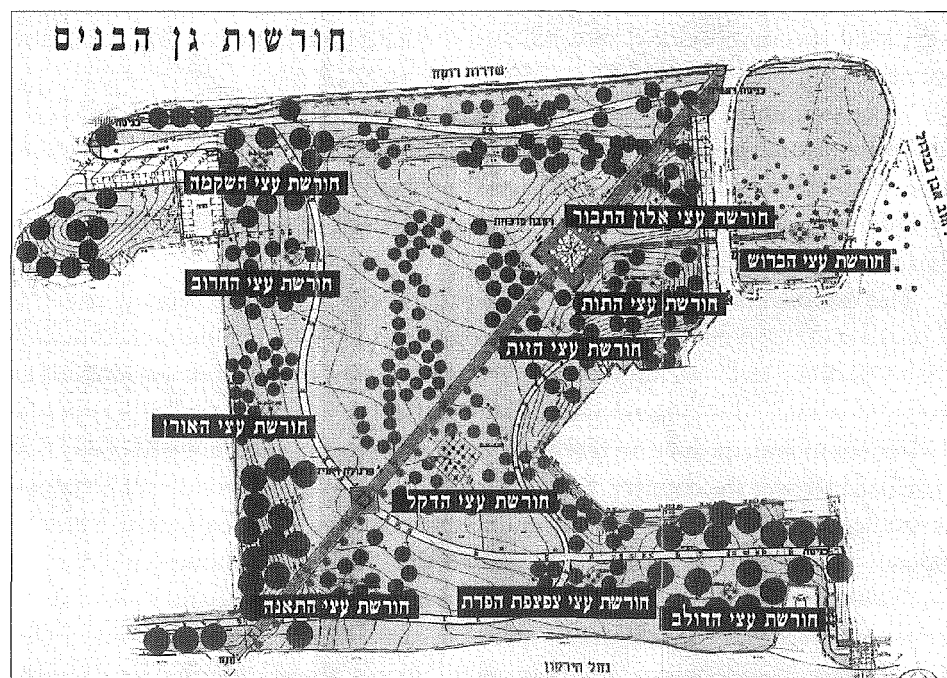


Figure 1: Sons' Garden Groves
– Sarig, 2002

1. *Quercus ithaburensis*
2. *Cupressus sempervirens*
3. *Morus*
4. *Olea europaea*
5. *Phoenix dactylifera*
6. *Populus euphratica*
7. *Platanus orientalis*
8. *Ficus sycomorus*
9. *Ceratonia siliqua*
10. *Pinus*
11. *Ficus carica*.

Walking in the garden's paths, in the country's open air, remember those, who through their death decreed us to live. Thanks to them, all is blooming and regenerating as in the past. (Tel Aviv Memorial Hall, 1965)

Gideon Sarig, who designed the central memorial garden of Tel Aviv 35 years later in 2002, located his memorial columns within groves of local spices, each representing another war. Palm groves, fig groves, sycamores, pines and others reflect the local tradition of sacred groves in the eyes of the designer.

How can we relate these findings to the current discussion about the local flora versus the global flora in landscape architecture, or more specifically, in the Israeli garden? How can we explain the dominance of the local vegetation that stands out from the thousands of acclimatised species? The answer is complex and can be presented from both the historical perspective and the ideological-political point of view.

Historically, the attempt to base the design of the Hebrew garden on local components was a romantic aspiration promoted by cultural agents who were not part of the professional milieu. Gardeners and landscape gardeners found the local vegetation unattractive, slow growing and complicated in reproduction. They were familiar with European species and found them appropriate for use. Because of the geographical location of the country, as well as the influence of the British authorities, it was relatively easy to assimilate thousands of species into the local garden. Gradually, this trend changed. With the accumulation of botanical knowledge and an awareness of ecological issues, it became clear that the local flora was still a relevant resource for gardening. As nurseries specialised in nurturing indigenous species, these plants became a preferable choice for landscape architects and gardeners. Planting the hundreds of miles of the new cross-country highway with local species promoted research and the adoption of new technologies and species in gardening (mid-1990s).

When examining the ideological and political perspective of the Israeli garden, we find three distinct periods or trends. During the first one – the pre-state Israel period, Zionist ideology had a clear set of vegetal preferences that favoured local species because of their characters and the historical, as well as the biblical, associations that they provoked.

The establishment of the state of Israel (1948) marks the second trend as “ingathering the exiles” became crucial to Zionist ideology. The need to formulate the codes of the Hebrew culture, which characterised the first period, was replaced by the need to make this culture visible. “Making the landscape bloom”, as a common Zionist command, dictated an intensive use of easy-growing, acclimatised plants that were used all over the country. Furthermore, the use of these species was perceived as an allegory for the creation of the multicultural society. Acclimatisation, which in Hebrew translates as “adoption”, emphasises this attitude of fondness and care for the “new-comers” (Gindel, 1956). The last trend came gradually, and today there is a clear preference for the indigenous species in gardens of national significance. This trend is a result of ideological and political influences, among others. After the 1967 war, the Israeli search for local identity and a sense of ‘homeness’ was influenced

by the biblical landscapes of Israel that were conquered in the war (the West Bank). The *genius loci* of the Palestinian villages became a source of inspiration for Israeli architects (Nitzan-Shiftan, 2004) and landscape architects. The local flora gained a renewed significance as it represented this movement of “going back to one’s roots”. Not surprisingly, the most dominant nursery associated with this trend was located in the West Bank.

The development of the profession of landscape architecture (beside gardening sciences and botany) also contributed to the preference for indigenous species. As more practitioners became involved in the design of landscapes and gardens and as ecological approaches became more dominant in the design theory, the characteristics of the Israeli garden changed. How these political and ecological processes worked together is a question requiring further research.

Today, the debate concerning the Israeli identity and ‘place’ is more loaded than ever. Because of the shrinking agricultural lands, the spread of urbanised areas, globalisation, and the conflict with the Palestinians, the landscape is becoming an important means in maintaining the Israeli identity. Will we become more rooted if we replant old olive trees next to our newly built houses? Will planting palm trees make us “like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither” (Psalm 1:3)?

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NOTES

¹ The term “Hebrew garden/culture” relates to the pre-statehood period. In 1948 it was changed to “Israeli garden/culture”.