

THE ARMCHAIR BOOK OF GARDENS



the ARMCHAIR BOOK *of*

GARDENS

a miscellany

JANE BILLINGHURST



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For Jeanne

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INTRODUCTION

EVER SINCE the first person planted a seed, then watched pale shoots explode into green, humans have felt deeply connected to their gardens. Where survival depended on fruitful crops, gardens were a link to the divine. Demeter was the Greek goddess of the bountiful harvest; the Maya had the handsome young maize god, his hair glowing golden in the autumn light. As the earth blossomed into abundance, gardeners thanked the spirits for nurturing both their bodies and their souls. In the temple gardens at Assur, flower beds provided bright, fragrant offerings for the gods of the Assyrians. Desert dwellers corralled

< Artsand Crafts designer William Morris (1834–96)
wove the wonders of the garden into his fabrics.

water, planting trees to banish heat and offer respite. For ancient myth-makers, gardens were the calm at the center of a threatening world, oases that sheltered heroes during their travels. Many religions portray the garden as the closest place to paradise on Earth.

2 Through the centuries, in gardens protected by stone walls, fences, and hedges, people have shaped the natural environment to meet their needs, pursue their desires, and reflect their values. Mughal emperors favored geometric patterns, with whispering water, heady fragrances, and luscious fruit conjuring up visions of the world they hoped to enter after death. Le Nôtre laid out the grand avenues of the Sun King's gardens at Versailles as a testament to human supremacy over Nature. Chinese scholars looked for rocks sculpted by currents deep in Lake Tai, seeking to bring the forces of Tao into their gardens. Healers everywhere cultivated medicinal herbs to treat the sick.

From the beginning, gardens have inspired imaginative responses, and not only from those who labor to create them. Using brush and paint, European botanical observers meticulously recorded the hues, textures, and wonders of precious tulips from Turkey, startling cannalilies from the West Indies, and exotic Abyssinian bananas. In all parts of the world, in thread, clay, and stone, on vases and vellum, artists have recreated the garden's intricate patterns, sweeping vistas, and shady corners. Poets, novelists, and memoirists have celebrated the garden's beauty, explored its mysteries, and lamented the frustrations it can bring. A creative exchange exists between those who actually make gardens and those who imagine them in other ways. In Italy,



و در عهد امیر کبیر که در آن روزگار بود و در آن زمان که امیر کبیر در آن روزگار بود
تکلیف که توحید بر او نهاده و فرموده آن را پس از آنکه در آن روزگار بود و در آن زمان که



تا آنکه در آن روزگار بود و در آن زمان که امیر کبیر در آن روزگار بود و در آن زمان که
تکلیف که توحید بر او نهاده و فرموده آن را پس از آنکه در آن روزگار بود و در آن زمان که

has shifted. A once-gentle stream now gushes in a torrent, scarlets have erupted from tightly closed buds, soft green has turned lustrously dark, tart flavors have mellowed, fragrance fills the air. Gardens, these places of social comment, aesthetic satisfaction, and emotional and spiritual connection, are also places where we quite simply *live*. We walk through them for exercise. We hold parties against backdrops of roses and honeysuckle. We sun ourselves amidst the petunias or curl up with a book in willow-patterned shade. No matter if it stretches for acres or is no bigger than a pocket handkerchief, the garden offers us joy, contemplative quiet, surprising revelations, and womblike protection.

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When I moved to Washington State five years ago from the Canadian prairies, I had the luxury of starting my garden from scratch. I knew stately English landscape gardens from my youth, but the village where I spent my childhood had cottage gardens crammed with bachelor's buttons, forget-me-nots, and love-in-a-mist, hollyhocks shooting up through the chaos. These tightly planted, riotous spaces remain my favorite kind of garden. As soon as I had settled into my new home, I wanted hollyhocks—and holly and ivy, so that I could decorate the house at Christmas as we had when I was young. But hollyhocks suffer from rust in the Pacific Northwest, and holly and ivy escape to wreak havoc in the forest.

Instead, I learned to negotiate with my surroundings. Now, beyond a relatively manicured patio, my flower garden fades into a background of shrubs sturdy enough to enjoy regular pruning by

deer. The shrubs give way to a disarray of hardhack, thimbleberry, and Nootka rose that I leave to the birds to seed. My garden is where I go on a summer evening to relax, surrounded by industrious bees and garter snakes soaking up the warmth of the day. I enjoy inviting people in to take a seat among the rhododendrons, the heathers, or the Japanese anemones, depending on the season. I have found a balance that works for me in my garden. At least for now.

Whenever I travel, gardens beckon. By accident or design, I have found myself in experimental gardens at Chaumont-sur-Loire; classical Chinese gardens in Suzhou and Shanghai; Japanese gardens in Portland, Oregon, and Albuquerque, New Mexico. William Kent's masterpiece of English landscape design at Rousham. The meticulously restored Gertrude Jekyll gardens at the Manor House at Upton Grey. Sonoran desert gardens in Arizona. Abandoned subsistence gardens on Village Island near Alert Bay, British Columbia. Gardens in New Zealand, Sweden, Chicago, California, and Montreal. Gardens great and small, intricate and simple. Each one expresses an idea, a point of view, a vision. And each, in its own way, is beautiful.

A lifetime isn't long enough to visit all the gardens we'd like to see. For me, the next best thing to being in a garden is to imagine being in one. In this book, I invite you to explore how others have envisioned, executed, and enjoyed the ever-seductive idea of the garden.

> The garden of Godwin King (1864–1948),
at Stonelands near West Hoathly, Sussex



Renaissance gardeners consulted Pliny's descriptions of his villa gardens and the poetry of Virgil when creating their extravagant villa gardens. The designers of Picturesque gardens in England—with their romantic wildness—looked to the landscape paintings of Salvatore Rosa for inspiration. William Morris, in 1881, likened embroidery to “gardening with silk and gold threads.” The fabrics and wallpapers he designed transported the swirl of vines and the explosive colors of the garden into the home.

Above all, gardens promise us pleasure. A garden engages our senses as soon as we step into it. Sounds soothe, colors delight, tastes satisfy, textures arrest. Every time we visit a garden, the kaleidoscope



Le Jardin des Plantes in Paris, circa 1805



SHADES OF PARADISE

SOMEWHERE IN OUR collective consciousness, there exists a garden of dazzling, unimaginable beauty. Sparkling streams meander among trees of infinite abundance, in the shade of whose branches a person can relax into pure delight. No sight or sound from the outside world intrudes. The vibrant colors and heady fragrances invite all who enter to immerse themselves in this perfect place. Human frailties drift away as the garden whispers promises of eternity. This paradise haunts the edges of our lives—lost, yet to be found, or awaiting us after death—its likeness captured in cuneiform characters pressed into

< The prophet Enoch seated in a garden in Paradise

clay tablets, Islamic script etched in camel bone, Latin letters inked onto vellum, and Chinese ideographs brushed onto scrolls of silk.

Through the ages, people have sought to replicate this paradise on Earth. In imperial China, the Han emperor Wudi, who ruled a century before the Common Era, ordered the construction of gardens featuring lakes, rocks, and islands—miniature worlds that, if beautiful enough, might tempt the Immortals from their distant mountain homes to take up residence in his empire, bringing with them the secret of eternal life. The ancient Greeks lived in a mountainous, parched land where gardens were a rarity. In Greek myth, heroes discover fertile gardens in the course of their travels. In these unexpected havens, the adventurer can rest and regain his strength before returning to his quest. The fourfold gardens, or *chahar bagh*, of the Islamic world are walled, rectangular spaces quartered by watercourses that meet at a central pool or viewing pavilion. Planted with fruit trees and fragrant flowers, these cool oases emphasize luxury and relaxation, reminding the faithful of the rewards to come in the next world.

Walled gardens in medieval Europe also made spiritual connections. The fountain in the centre of the *hortus conclusus*—or enclosed garden—symbolized the baptismal font. White Madonna lilies represented the Virgin Mary’s purity, violets her humility, and red roses the blood of Christian martyrs. As the garden behind its wall was fruitful, so was the Virgin. The secular equivalent, the *hortus deliciarum*, or garden of pleasure, was a space where cultural and intellectual diversions could be pursued away from the rigors of the world.

Walled or not, gardens allow chattering thoughts to be stilled and memories to unfold. Scents on the breeze lure the mind back to a time when senses were heightened and joys were sharp. Reminiscences of childhood often immortalize a lost Elysium, a time and place that evaporates in the onslaught of growing up. The gardens we encounter in later life may help us to reconnect with our former selves. Freed, however fleetingly, from the pressures of the present, we find respite in gardens that allow us glimpses of past and future paradises.

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The Garden of the Gods

In Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, makes an epic journey through Hades and on to the Garden of the Gods, where the Tree of Life glitters in the sun to welcome him.

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AND LO! THE *gesdin* shining stands
With crystal branches in the golden sands,
In this immortal garden stands the Tree,
With trunk of gold, and beautiful to see,
Beside a sacred fount the tree is placed,
With emeralds and unknown gems is graced.

Ishtar and Iqdubar: The Epic of Babylon



Rewards for the Faithful

. . .

BUT FOR SUCH as fear the time when they will stand before (the Judgment Seat of) their Lord, there will be two Gardens—
Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?—
Containing all kinds (of trees and delights);—
Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?—
In them (each) will be two Springs flowing (free);
Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?—
In them will be Fruits of every kind, two and two.
Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?—
They will recline on Carpets, whose inner linings will be of rich brocade: the Fruit of the Gardens will be near (and easy of reach).
Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?—
In them will be (Maidens), chaste, restraining their glances, whom no man or Jinn before them has touched:—
Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?—
Like unto Rubies and coral.

13

*Interpretation of the Holy Qur'an,
surah 55, verses 46–58*



Eden

. . .

AND THE LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

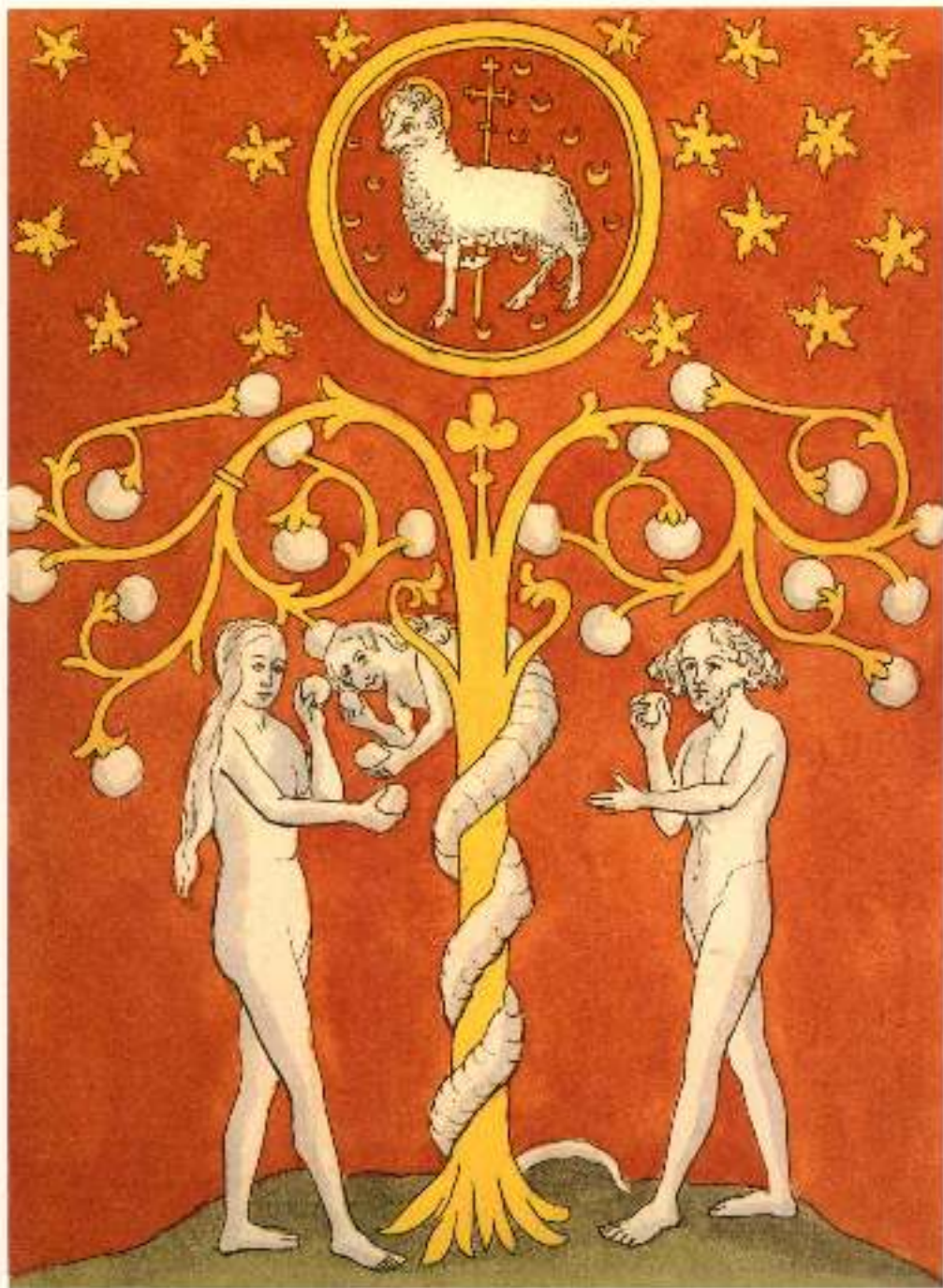
14 And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads . . .

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

The Bible, Genesis 2:8-15

> Adam and Eve in a stylized Garden of Eden





The Pure Land

*In the scriptures of Pure Land Buddhism,
the spiritual teacher Gautama describes Sukhâvatî—the land
of bliss—to his favorite disciple, Ānanda.*

NOW, O ĀNANDA, that world Sukhâvatî is fragrant with several sweet-smelling scents, rich in manifold flowers and fruits, adorned with gem trees, and frequented by tribes of manifold sweet-voiced birds . . .

And, O Ānanda, the roots, trunks, branches, small branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits of all those trees are pleasant to touch, and fragrant. And, when those [trees] are moved by the wind, a sweet and delightful sound proceeds from them, never tiring, and never disagreeable to hear.

*The Sutra on the Buddha of Eternal Life
or the Larger Sukhâvatî-Vyûha*

Sacred Grove of Kaśyapa

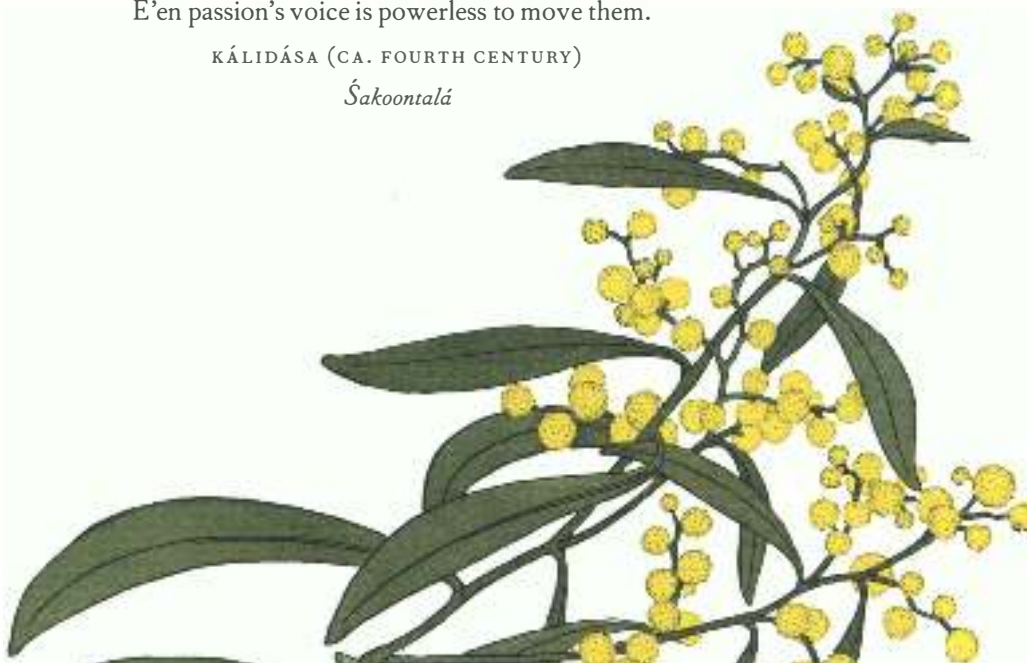
In the Indian drama Śakoontalá, written sometime between the fourth and the sixth centuries, a king reconnects with his lost love and their child in the sacred grove of the hermit Kaśyapa.

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IN SUCH A place as this do saints of earth
Long to complete their acts of penance; here,
Beneath the shade of everlasting trees,
Transplanted from the groves of Paradise,
May they inhale the balmy air, and need
No other nourishment; here may they bathe
In fountains sparkling with the golden dust
Of lilies; here, on jewelled slabs of marble,
In meditation rapt, may they recline;
Here, in the presence of celestial nymphs,
E'en passion's voice is powerless to move them.

KÁLIDÁSA (CA. FOURTH CENTURY)

Śakoontalá



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