

Gardens and Monuments of India

Article and photographs by Maryalice Koehne

MANY CULTURES and gardening legacies meet in India, so it's no wonder its gardens, monuments, and traditions are as rich and varied as any on earth. Visiting northwestern India while on the American Horticultural Society's Travel Study Program last November was an unforgettable experience for me and 12 other participants who enjoyed camaraderie, luxurious accommodations in former palaces, and delightful local cuisine.

Among the group's favorite gardens were those created in the paradise tradition during the Mughal dynasty (1526–1858), most notably the formal raised gardens designed in the *charbagh* system (four-part garden) intersected in the center by water channels representing the four rivers of life. To the Mughals, who invaded India from the north in the 1500s and ruled it for centuries, water was a key element in garden design. Examples of Mughal gardens can be seen at Humayan's Tomb in Delhi and the world-famous Taj Mahal in Agra.

Our group also visited a variety of private gardens ranging from contemporary urban rooftop oases to English-style perennial borders at country homes and hotels—the legacy of 19th- and early 20th-century English rule. We even strolled through the Ayurvedic (medicinal herb) garden at Benares Hindu University and visited Deer Park in Sarnath, where Prince Siddhartha (Buddha) is said to have gained enlightenment 2,500 years ago as he sat under a Bodhi tree.

REDISCOVERING INDIA'S GARDENING PAST

Because of the altering effects of time, weather, and British rule, the plantings in the Mughal gardens lay no claim to historical accuracy. Ironically, interest in preserving India's buildings and gardens didn't exist until the late 1800s, when Englishmen such as Lord George Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1898 to 1905, realized that artistic and historic treasures were being lost. More recently, the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of a branch of Shiite Islam, paid for the ongoing restoration of the gardens at Humayan's Tomb, India's first great imperial tomb that also in-



Above: A Mughal-style garden in the women's quarters at the old palace at Amber, Jaipur. Left: Plant hobbyist K. K. Agrawal at his Jaipur rooftop garden where he grows an enormous collection of succulents in containers.



spired the architecture of the Taj Mahal.

The Taj is unusual because the monument is at the end of a garden, whereas Mughal gardens usually feature a pavilion in the middle—at the intersection of the water channels. Tomb gardens like the Taj

have been better preserved than pleasure gardens like the Moonlight Garden (Mahtab Bagh) across the Yamuna River because they were left in the care of priests.

Documentation of pre-British plantings in many of India's gardens has been slow in coming. In 1995, David L. Lentz, the first paleoethnobotanist to work at a Mughal garden site, discovered plants indigenous to India at the site of the Moonlight Garden. Other ongoing research by garden historians centers on Mughal-era literature, which includes references to fruit trees like figs, dates, mangos, almonds, and pomegranates, as well as flowers such as violets, oleanders, and zinnias.

A ROOFTOP FOR SUCCULENTS

In addition to the grand public gardens, the AHS group toured large estate gardens and city gardens on rooftops and balconies. The gem of the private gardens was the Jaipur rooftop garden of K.K. Agrawal, a jeweler and designer, who maintains the largest collection of living rocks (*Lithops* spp.) in India. "Lithops are easy to grow from seeds if you are patient," he explains. "In a year's time, a seedling will be only the size of a pea." His patience has rewarded him tenfold. "I often spend an hour a day admiring them," says Agrawal.

His rooftop collection also includes 789 species of cacti, 101 euphorbias, and hundreds of other succulents—all grown in pots. A wire-mesh screen shields the plants from intense sunlight, wind, and hail. (You can see photos of his collection at www.macro-designs.com.)

After visiting so many memorable gardens in India, the AHS tour participants had only one question at the conclusion of the trip: "When can we return?"

Maryalice Koehne is a free-lance writer living in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

Turning to Natives to Cope with Water Shortages

At the time of the AHS Travel Study trip in November 2002, the areas visited were in the midst of a seven-year drought, so many of the water features in the gardens were dry. The effect of prolonged drought was starkly illustrated by the eerie quiet of the beautiful but deserted city of Fatehpur Sikri, built in the late 1500s and later abandoned for lack of water.



A fountain at a former imperial retreat on the island of Jag Mandir.

Historically, droughts have caused widespread starvation in India, but a columnist for *The Times of India New Delhi* wrote in November 2002 that the country is much better prepared now than in 1979, when it experienced what he called "the last of the truly traumatic droughts." He attributed this progress in part to the country's embracing a "green revolution."

Adds S.K. Mathur Kumar, director of horticulture for the Oberoi Group of hotels, "The concept of using native plants that are drought resistant and adapted to local conditions is catching up fast since the shortage of water is on the increase and the adoption of native plants is becoming a *must* for gardens to exist."

—M.K.



2003 American Horticultural Society TRAVEL STUDY PROGRAM

Gardens of Santa Barbara

October 28–November 2, 2003



Through visits to an astonishing variety of garden styles, travelers to the gardens of Santa Barbara will view firsthand the exceptional range of trees, shrubs, perennials, and annuals that can be grown in this beautiful city by the ocean. Best described as a Mediterranean climate, Santa Barbara's environment can boast of world-class gardens. Starting with the lush grounds of the host hotel, Four Seasons Biltmore, this travel study tour includes fantastic garden themes and collections, from striking contemporary designs to tropicals and subtropicals, California natives, and Ganna Walska's famed Lotusland.

Patrick Anderson of Fallbrook, California, will be hosting this tour. A long-standing member of the American Horticultural Society, he has an extensive knowledge of plants and a keen interest in California gardens. His own garden has been featured on the PBS series "Victory Garden." It is through his personal contacts that many of these visits have been made possible.

For complete details of the exciting 2003 schedule, visit the AHS Web site at www.ahs.org or call the Leonard Haertter Travel Company at (800) 942-6666.

No member dues are used to support the Travel Study Program.