Israel is home to more than a few lush, green gardens where the public is welcome to while away the hours while learning a thing or two about the wealth of flora that grows in the land of Israel, among other places. "The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad." (Genesis 2:8-9)

The biblical garden of Eden is perhaps the most famous garden in all of western tradition, so famous that there is no need to retell the entire story here. It is, however, worth recalling the ending: "So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden... and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life." (Genesis 3:23-24)

Perhaps some primal urge to recreate that garden or find the tree of life is at the root of the modern world’s love of gardens and enthusiasm for collecting plants. Israel is no exception to this – gardens can be found throughout the country, from the Botanical Garden of Eilat at its southern tip to the many private and public gardens that dot the Galilee and Golan Heights in the north to the world-renowned Bahai gardens in Acre and Haifa. Some of the most spectacular gardens actually can be found in the center of the country, where they are easily accessible by public transportation.
Neot Kedumim – The Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel

Botanical garden
625 acres
Over 630 types of biblical and talmudic plants as well as animals and archaeological finds

Admission fee
Brochures and maps are available for self-guided tours. Guided tours in different languages, a variety of activities, and meals can be arranged if reservations are made in advance.

A number of trails are wheelchair accessible
Tel.: (08) 977-0777
www.neot-kedumim.org.il (English), www.n-k.org.il (Hebrew)
On Route 443, between Modi'in and Route 1

Neot Kedumim’s roots can be traced back to the Second Aliyah, when young idealists like future-prime minister David Ben-Gurion and poetess Rachel Bluwstein made their way to the land of Israel to lay the foundations for a new state. The pioneers included Dr. Ephraim and Hannah Hareuveni, botanists from the Ukraine who dreamed of connecting the words of the Torah to the plants growing in the land, explains Iris Pomerantz Golan, who is a guide at Neot Kedumim.

The couple toured the entire land of Israel and the surrounding areas to study its indigenous plants with the goal of identifying every plant mentioned in the Bible. Their home in Jerusalem’s Bukharan Quarter doubled as a botany museum that displayed their collection of dried plants, which they ultimately donated to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

“They focused on understanding the connection between nature and the Torah. It is not clear if they were the first to focus on this, but they brought it a big step forward,” Golan says.

After their deaths, their son Nogah Hareuveni, who had studied nuclear physics and had intended to work in that field, realized that if he did not continue his parents’ work, no one else would do so. He dedicated his life to realizing his parents’ vision and in 1965, he obtained a 100-year lease for the 625 acres that became Neot Kedumim. At the time, the hilly plot was on a remote frontier. Two years later, in the wake of the Six Day War, that changed.

Meanwhile, Hareuveni was hard at work transforming the land itself.

“The Bible makes it clear that the land was forested – Joshua told people to clear the land of trees so they could plant fields for agriculture, but over the ages the land was neglected and became barren,” Golan says. “Nogah restored the landscape that had been here. He brought plants from all over the country to the park and had soil trucked in because it had eroded away in many places. Everything here was planted, though it was done in a way that looks natural. Neot Kedumim was originally as barren as the hills surrounding it.”

Hareuveni devoted 25 years not only to restoring the landscape of the area, which the Bible refers to as the Shephelah, but also to recreating landscapes of other parts of the country, from the forests of the Carmel to the coastal plain of the Sharon to the desert of Jericho. He collected plants from each region. The collection did not include only small, young plants; when Route 1 was paved from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, the venerable elbes trees that were on its path were relocated to Neot Kedumim.

Today Neot Kedumim is a botanical garden where over 630 plants that are mentioned in the Bible grow. That said, not all biblical plants are suited to its climate; the famous cedars of Lebanon grow to 90 feet in Lebanon, but are much shorter in the Shephelah. The garden only contains biblical plants: eucalyptus, guava, passionflower, and other plants that have taken root in Israel in more recent times are not grown there.

In addition to the flora, Hareuveni was involved in reintroducing some biblical fauna. The fallow deer, which once was common throughout the land of Israel, had become extinct in Israel. Prior to the Iranian revolution in 1979, a herd of fallow deer was brought to Israel from Iran. Part of the herd was brought to Neot Kedumim and part to the Hai Bar Carmel: the Persian deer acclimated well and are thriving at both sites today.

Hareuveni and the Neot Kedumim staff received the Israel Prize in 1994 for their unique contribution to Israeli society and the state. They were praised for providing all with access to the biblical and talmudic landscape that is a central part of Jewish heritage and instilling a love of the land in visitors to Neot Kedumim.

The garden also contains a wealth of archaeological findings, including the remains of a church from the fourth century CE with a mosaic floor adorned with a cross, tunnels from the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt, dozens of cisterns, oil presses, wine presses, a Jewish ritual bath, and houses. Archaeological excavations conducted at the park revealed that it has been populated throughout much of history, Golan notes.

Much of the garden has been organized by association, with plants mentioned together in the Bible or Talmud grouped in the same general area. The garden’s Valley of the Song of Songs has plants that appear in the biblical Song of Songs, the Hill of the Menorah has olive trees and an oil press, and one trail leads through an area where the seven species mentioned in the Bible are cultivated.

In another section, Neot Kedumim brings to life the discussion in the Talmud on what exactly constitutes a kosher sukka. The Talmud provides numerous examples of kosher and unkosher sukka. Many of the examples, both kosher and unkosher, have been built at Neot Kedumim, including very high and low sukka, sukka built on top of one
Neot Kedumim offers a wide variety of activities, many of which are connected to the seasons and holidays. They range from planting trees in the ceremonial planting area in cooperation with Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund (KKL-JNF) to a cooking tour that involves gathering plants and cooking them outside at a campsite. One of the more popular activities, for both adults and children, is herding sheep. Guides offer visitors tips from the Bible on how to do so.

"Some people are unsure at first, but they all succeed to do it," Golan says.

The garden is well designed for a family tour with trails of different lengths, bathrooms, paved paths, and trashcans throughout it. Neot Kedumim also has halls and outdoor spaces for large events and conferences. The garden can be lit up beautifully at night for wedding ceremonies.

The Mount Scopus Botanical Garden in Memory of Montague Lamport

Botanical garden
Six acres
1,000 types of indigenous plants
Free entry
Brochures and maps are available for self-guided tours. Guided tours in different languages and a variety of activities for children, teenagers, and adults can be arranged if reservations are made in advance.

Much of the garden is wheelchair accessible.
Tel.: (02) 588-2596
www.botanic-garden.huji.ac.il

The Mount Scopus Botanical Garden in Memory of Montague Lamport is the oldest botanical garden in Israel. It was established as part of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1931, only a few years after the university itself began operating. Professor Otto Warburg, who founded the university’s botany department, came up with the idea of an ecological garden with indigenous Israeli plants and his student, Dr. Alexander Eig, implemented it, collecting plants from far and near. In 1936, Eig even brought cedars of Lebanon from Lebanon to plant in the university’s growing garden.

"The plants are organized by local ecosystems, which was a very innovative idea back then," explains Dr. Meni Neuman, director of the garden.

Several impressive burial caves from the time of the Second Temple were discovered in the area designated for the garden. The roots of the trees growing above them cover the walls of some caves, providing a rare glimpse of how roots develop. One cave served as the burial plot of a Nazirite family in the first century CE and contained two sarcophagi and 14 ossuaries, most of which were decorated and some of which bore inscriptions.

The most famous burial cave contained an inscription in Hebrew and Greek declaring that it was the burial site of Nicanor, who the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Yoma 38A) relates contributed two gates for the Second Temple. Zionist leader Menahem Ussishkin, who had helped acquire the site for the university, was so enthralled by this discovery that he wanted to make the burial cave into the pantheon of the Zionist leaders. Hovevei Zion leader Leon (Judah Leib) Pinsker was reinterred there in 1934 and Ussishkin himself was laid to rest there in 1941. Further development of the pantheon was interrupted by the War of Independence in 1948, which ended with Mount Scopus under Jordanian control.

The Hebrew University relocated its activities to temporary sites around Jerusalem until 1954, when it began to build a new campus, including a new botanical garden, in Jerusalem’s Givat Ram neighborhood. In the wake of the Six Day War in 1967, Mount Scopus returned to Israeli hands. It took over a decade for the university to restore the campus and even longer to restore the garden, which officially reopened in 1988. A donation from Steven and Gail Victor of Canada two decades later has allowed the university, in cooperation with KKL-JNF, to restore the garden to its former glory. Artist

Below:
The Mount Scopus Botanical Garden recreates numerous Israeli ecosystems, from lakes to deserts. (Miriam S. Simon)
Ran Morin, who oversaw the initiative, devoted great effort to restoring the garden to its original state and not simply creating a new garden. Even though the garden covers only six acres, it contains over 1,000 types of plants, all of which are indigenous to Israel. Defining indigenous plants is a bit of a challenge, Neuman notes, explaining that many plants that are identified with Israel actually are invasive species that arrived in modern times. For example, the famous sabra first arrived in Israel only 300 years ago.

The garden’s location, high up on a mountain on the edge of the desert, makes it possible to recreate most of the ecosystems in Israel. With only a few steps, visitors can wander from a section of coastal scrub to coastal sand dunes, Negev sand dunes, Negev highlands, or Mediterranean scrub. There also are several sections with water plants and a hothouse with plants from the Ein Gedi region. A significant percent of the plants in the garden are endangered species, Neuman points out. Israel has developed rapidly, especially in the past few decades, and many unique habitats are shrinking and even disappearing as a result. Many species of plants and animals that were found only in those environments are on the verge of disappearing.

Neuman and his colleagues at the garden are devoted to preserving these species, planting them in the garden and nurturing them carefully as well as saving their seeds.

“We want to preserve the gene pool,” he says. Peregrinating bellflower (known in Hebrew as paamonit hadora and in Latin as Campanula peregrina), whose blue flowers once could be seen in Nahal Kziv, is one of the species that the botanical garden’s intervention has helped bring back from the brink of extinction.

The botanical garden also is involved in promoting environmental ethics and places an emphasis on green topics such as sustainability, recycling water, and composting.

In the garden’s center sits a library dedicated to the memory of Shmuel Zvi Tudor, an IDF soldier who lost his life in a military operation in the garden in 1959. The library is often used to host seminars and courses, both for university students and for the public. The garden hosts a variety of courses and activities for the public, from workshops on continuing education programs for adults to guided tours and volunteer programs. A group of injured IDF veterans volunteer regularly in the garden. Since the garden contains such a wide variety of plants, visitors can see something different each time they come.

Jerusalem Botanical Gardens

When the Hebrew University began to build a new campus in Givat Ram in the 1950s, it made sure to dedicate space to serve as a research garden for its botany and horticulture students and faculty. The garden grew over the years and eventually became so large that it made sense for it to become an independent entity. In 1995, it became a nonprofit organization which is supported by a number of organizations and in addition to its research activities, the garden now offers a broad range of activities for the public as well as serving as a green lung in the heart of Jerusalem.

“My mission is to make the heavy academic stuff approachable to a popular audience. Our slogan is, ‘plants grow people,’ because people use cotton, wood, food, air, and many other things that come from plants,” says Dr. Ori Fragman-Sapir, head scientist of the Jerusalem Botanical Gardens. “We have programming for all ages, from workshops on making bread for kids to a gardening course for adults to a course for university students on the flora and vegetation of Israel.”

The garden reaches out to the varied population of Jerusalem: Jewish, Moslem, and Christian; and...
Facing page:

Above:

GARDENS

Garden.

The Jerusalem Botanical Gardens is the largest botanical garden in the country. About 100 Jerusalem residents volunteer regularly at the garden; many come for two weeks and spend the mornings working in the botanical garden and the afternoons touring Israel.

The garden also provides a home and sustenance for wildlife in Jerusalem. For example, the cherries on its trees attract birds, as do the pears and pomegranates, which open and release their seeds when they are left on the tree instead of being harvested. Granates, which open and release their seeds when they are left on the tree instead of being harvested. granates, which open and release their seeds when they are left on the tree instead of being harvested.

The Jerusalem Botanical Gardens is one of the small group of official botanical gardens in Israel that receive some government support. In 2006, the Knesset passed legislation defining a botanical garden as a garden with at least 3,000 different types of plants that are planted in a logical, scientific order for research, scientific, or educational purposes. This means that the plants are labeled with their scientific names and information about them is catalogued in a database. The garden’s goals must be to preserve species of plants, to acclimate plants, or to teach and research in botany, ecology, and agriculture. In addition, it must be an NPO and located on land zoned as open land. A council of botanical gardens was established and the agriculture minister given the discretion to override the criteria in specific cases with the council’s approval. The criteria have since been altered, though the Jerusalem Botanical Gardens still meets the original, strict criteria.

The plants in the Jerusalem Botanical Gardens are arranged in six geographic divisions (Europe, North Africa, North America, Asia, Australia, and the Mediterranean). Fragman-Sapir and his colleagues try to recreate the atmosphere of each region, with a mud hut and a grass maze in the South African section, wild coffee plants in the Australian section, and a Bible path with about 30 biblical plants in the Asian section. The fact that it is an international garden means that Israeli plants can be seen in comparison to others. The South Africa section also includes a collection of aloe plants, which do not use much water and illustrate the emphasis that is placed on promoting water conservation and exploring how to build a garden that uses water wisely. In addition, the garden has a herb and medicinal plant section and a burial cave from Second Temple times.

Work currently is underway on the Children’s Discovery Path, which will be lined with activities for children, and the Tropical Conservatory, which will have tropical rainforest plants and desert plants. They are expected to open in a year or two. There are also meeting rooms, an auditorium, and exhibitions in the visitors center at the garden.

The weather and climate in Jerusalem suits plants that grow in many places, Fragman-Sapir notes, adding that the garden also cooperates with Kibbutz Ein Gedi, which has a very different climate thanks to its location alongside the Dead Sea.

“We send it plants that we think will thrive in those conditions. Many did indeed succeed and Ein Gedi became a botanical garden too,” he says.

In 1954, a warship carrying the remains of baron Edmond de Rothschild and Ramat Hanadiv at the visitors pavilion. The memorial gardens and visitors pavilion are wheelchair accessible.

Tel.: (04) 629-8111
www.ramathanadiv.org.il/en
On Route 852 between Zichron Ya’akov and Binyamina.

In 1954, a warship carrying the remains of baron Edmond de Rothschild and his wife Adelleit reached Israel. The leaders of the young State of Israel and the residents of the 44 settlements that
Below: One of the sculptures that Rhoda and Israel Traub designed attractively attempts to grasp the water that flows into the pool that is at the bottom of Ramat Hanadiv’s cascade garden.

The baron had supported a gathering for a royal funeral ceremony in which the couple was reunited at Ramat Hanadiv. Residents of each settlement brought a bag of soil from it to place on the grave. Rothschild (1845-1934) was widely referred to as the known benefactor (hanadiv hayadua in Hebrew) due to his generous support for a wide range of initiatives in the incipient state.

“He contributed to everything and the fund he established still is active today,” notes Ronith Sacks, a guide at the memorial garden.

In the initial design, the baron’s crypt was shaped like a pyramid, but it was changed to a burial cave in the style of those commonly used in the time of the Second Temple. It is built with local stone from Israel in accordance with his son James’s request. The crypt is at the heart of Ramat Hanadiv; it is surrounded by a meticulously cultivated memorial garden, which in turn is surrounded by a nature park. The research conducted in the nature park is a salute to the baron, who enthusiastically supported extensive research on agriculture in the land of Israel.

The visitors pavilion, which was completed in 2008 and is the first certified green building in Israel, serves as the entry point to Ramat Hanadiv. A bridge between the nature park and the memorial gardens, the pavilion has an information center and gift shop, screening room, and classrooms that host a variety of educational programs, restrooms, free lockers, a refreshment stand, a restaurant, and more.

The pavilion, whose original location was altered slightly so as not to disturb an old carob tree, looks like a hill from the side because its extra-thick concrete roof is covered with grass and greenery, including trees. Stone from the site was used in constructing the building to minimize construction waste. All pipes and wiring are concealed inside and under the energy-efficient structure, which is cooled by a quiet geothermal system.

There is a large playground and large parking lot next to the pavilion. Trees are strategically planted around the lot and when they reach their full size, they will provide shade for over 80 percent of the cars parked in it. In an effort to encourage nocturnal animals to roam freely at Ramat Hanadiv at night, illumination of the park after dark is minimized by measures like the motion-sensitive lights in the parking lot, which also are solar powered.

There is a large, shaded picnic area next to the parking lot since food is not permitted in the memorial garden. A therapeutic garden maintained by people with special needs and a footprint-shaped park with plants that attract butterflies in the spring also are located by the pavilion.

Green concepts prevail throughout Ramat Hanadiv, which gives priority to both ecology and aesthetics, Sacks notes. For example, the path connecting the memorial garden and nature park is adorned with olive trees, cyclamen, and vines, none of which need to be watered. The many animals found at the site include cows, who graze on the grass and thus prevent it from becoming a fire hazard. In addition, wood chips are scattered over flowerbeds, slowing the evaporation of water, enriching the soil, and preventing weeds.

Architect Uriel (Otto) Schiller designed the site with landscape architect Shlomo Weinberg (Oren) in the 1930s and it preserves his design to this day. Construction was delayed by World War II and the work was not completed until after the State of Israel’s establishment. A team of 10 gardeners, each of whom has an area that he is responsible for, maintains the site carefully today.

A row of old carob trees on an English-style lawn indicates the way to the tomb, which is surrounded by a number of specialized gardens: the fragrance garden; the rose garden; the cascade garden; the palm garden; and the iris garden. These formal European-style gardens with local and European vegetation are studded with stone sculptures that Rhoda and Israel Traub, of Zichron Ya’acov, created for the site. There also is an amphitheater in the memorial garden in which concerts are held.

Several motifs are repeated throughout the memorial garden, such as the number five for the five Rothschild brothers, Sacks explains. The most prevalent motif is contrast – between life and death and between nature and cultivated. More than half of the memorial garden is not tended as a formal garden but as natural, water-efficient growth and the discernible contrast between these sections adds interest and beauty to the site.

A map showing the villages that the baron helped is located above the cascade garden. At the bottom, there is a sculpture of a hand with water running out of it since like life itself, water cannot be grasped.

The garden contains 640 types of plants, including several dozen endangered and rare plants, but “it is not a botanical garden because it is a memorial site,” Sacks explains.

“We did not want to post signs identifying the plants because they interfere with the pleasure of just looking. Our website has the names and information about plants in the garden.” That said, two of the specialized gardens do have signs: the iris and fragrance gardens. Iris bulbs from all over the country were planted together in one area. As a result, from February to April, visitors can see all of the different irises that grow in Israel as they take turns blooming side by side. A number of them are endangered and the garden is a step toward their preservation. Caper, which has the opposite flowering season to the iris, is planted there too to keep things interesting the rest of the year. The fragrance garden brings together aromatic herbs and herbs with interesting textures so that blind visitors also can enjoy the garden, smelling and touching the different plants. The only dogs permitted in the park are seeing-eye dogs and the fragrance garden’s labels also are written in Braille.
Tel Aviv University Botanical Garden

The Tel Aviv University Botanical Garden was established about 40 years ago, around the time that the university’s campus in Tel Aviv’s Ramat Aviv neighborhood began to take shape. An integral part of the university, it is a venue for university courses and for ecological and botanical research, emphasizing the roles plants play in keeping the environment healthy. The garden’s collection has two main parts. The Noah Naftulski Garden for Israeli Flora, which is organized by environment, extends over about half of the premises. Everything in the garden was grown normally because there has been so much construction along the coastal plain. This actually is one of the few places of this unique facility, the plants themselves can be seen, growing normally. The lower floor is a dark, humid chamber where showerheads sprinkle water over the roots of the plants seen above every few minutes since the roots are growing in the air without soil, allowing researchers to observe the roots closely as they develop.

The garden itself is devoted to research, education, and biodiversity and conservation. It is home to 3,800 species of plants, all with signs bearing their scientific names. In addition, the garden maintains a database with details about all of the plants in its collection.

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The botanical garden’s collections also include the Mami-Elleven Garden of Utilitarian Plants, with coffee plants and other plants that are used to produce foods, oil, and fiber, and the Menashe Garden of Medicinal Plants.

Faculty members’ research has shaped the garden as well. Research plots are planted with the different plants being studied, such as the iris whose evolution Sapir is exploring. Prof. Yuval Waisel’s research on roots led to the creation of the two-story Sara Racine Root Laboratory. On the upper floor of this unique facility, the plants themselves can be seen, growing normally. The lower floor is a dark, humid chamber where showerheads sprinkle water over the roots of the plants seen above every few minutes since the roots are growing in the air without soil, allowing researchers to observe the roots closely as they develop.

The Steinhardt National Collections of Natural History Building is under construction between it and the university’s J. Meir Segals Garden for Zoological Research. Upon the completion of the building, which will contain a museum, research labs, an auditorium, and an amphitheater, Tel Aviv University will be home to an impressive nature complex dedicated to research and education.

The garden aims to encourage the use of plants that save water, it has a large collection of succulents and cacti, which grow in arid regions and can thrive in arid and saline conditions.

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On the educational front, there are courses for undergraduate and graduate students on topics such as horticulture and educational tours for groups that are led by research students. The garden is also open to the public free of charge and guests are welcome to wander through it and enjoy the tranquil beauty of the natural landscapes that are tucked away in this unknown corner of Tel Aviv above the congested Ayalon Highway.

Nature conservation is also a central part of the activities at the garden. Over 400 of the some 3,000 plants that grow in Israel are listed in the red book of endangered plants. About 40 of these endangered plants only are found in Israel so their loss would mean they are gone forever.

“If we don’t know what it does, we should save it now because it might have an impact which we will learn is important in the future,” Sapir says. “We have half of the endangered plants in Israel here and grow them in conditions that resemble their native environment.”

Rothschild’s dock (Rumex rothschildianus in Latin and homat haaviron in Hebrew), which was first documented in 1906 by Aaron Aaronsohn and named to honor baron Rothschild, is just one example of this. The endangered plant was only growing naturally at two spots, in Netanya and Herzliya. The dock was cultivated at the garden to produce seeds, which were then scattered at selected locations in what once was its native habitat in the central coastal region. As a result, the delicate blossoms of Rothschild’s dock can be seen flowering at 12 spots in Israel today.

Tel Aviv University Botanical Garden

Gardens

9 acres
3,800 types of plants from Israel, including many rare and endangered species, and specialized collections of plants from other parts of the world
Free entry
Brochures and maps are available for self-guided tours. Guided tours in different languages and a variety of educational activities can be arranged if reservations are made in advance.
Much of the garden is wheelchair accessible
Tel.: (03) 640-9910
http://botanic.tau.ac.il
Opposite Gate 2 to Tel Aviv University, Klausner Street, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv

The Tel Aviv University Botanical Garden is beautifully landscaped.

Facing page: The greenhouses at the Tel Aviv University Botanical Garden contain a wide variety of exotic plants.