

New York City's tiny Biblical Garden displays big slice of Holy Land's flora

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New York City's tiny Biblical Garden

By Ruth Brown

NEW YORK—Visit the Biblical Garden, the visitors guidebook to New York said. Biblical Garden? we asked. What's a Biblical Garden?

To find out, we took the Broadway M104 bus late one Sunday morning to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine at Amsterdam Avenue and 111th Street. Several tour buses were drawn up in front of the steps of the magnificent Gothic cathedral, the largest in the world, and tourists and worshipers were going in and out through the great bronze doors of the central portal. We, however, wanted to get to the garden before the tour guide was due to depart, so we turned south, then east to the garden, nestled against the towering cathedral walls.

We opened a green wooden gate and entered the garden, a quarter-acre plot divided into four sections of trees, flowers and herbs. It is a

peaceful area, and a couple of visitors were relaxing quietly on one of the stone benches set at the end of each section.

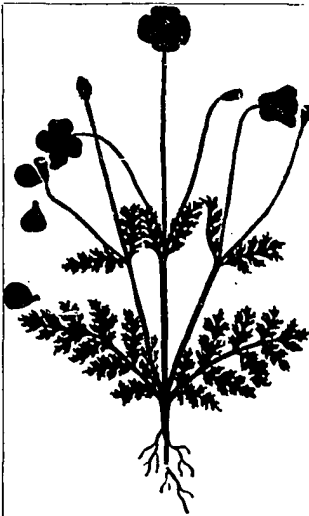
In the center, a handful of people were gathered around a young woman. Fingering the leaves of a tree, she was saying, "This apricot tree is probably the apple tree of the Bible. Apple trees were never mentioned in the Bible. They're a northern plant and couldn't grow in ancient Palestine. But they're being developed today in modern Israel."

The speaker was Abigail Miller, a doctoral candidate in botany at Lehman College, New York. Abigail is one of the volunteers who give visitors free guided tours of the garden on Wednesdays and Sundays between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. in July and August. During the rest of the year, including the winter months, visitors can see the garden on their own, for it is open every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

All the flora are clearly identified by their common name, followed by their Biblical name and reference, and finally by their botanical name.

THE BIBLICAL GARDEN emerged under the leadership of Sarah Larkin Loening of Southampton, Long Island. She believed it would prove inspirational to cathedral pilgrims, as well as serve as a children's garden of study. Today, it attracts an ecumenical following of thousands, including Jewish, Catholic and Protestant youth groups. Even Israelis, who boast the largest and most extensive Biblical garden in the world, their own 500-acre Neot Kedumim, come to visit. "The same plants look different here," Abigail explained, "because of the difference in soil, water and climate."

Each of the garden's plants, approximately 100, represents a species that has been mentioned in the



Anemone—Matthew 6:28-30.

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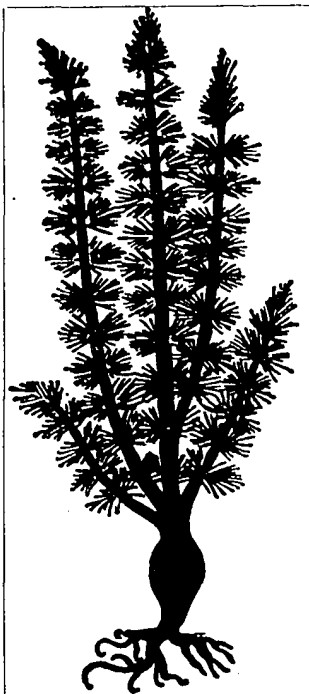
displays big slice of Holy Land's flora

Bible. Among the trees are the willow [Job 40:22] and walnut (Song of Solomon 6:11). The fruit trees include four apricot and four quince [Song of Solomon 2:3,5], one in each garden section. We were awed by the 10 Cedars of Lebanon [Numbers 24:6], each 25 feet tall, lined up stately against the south wall of the cathedral. Cedar trees were prized in ancient days for their power and strength and used widely in building.

Like the trees, most flora in Biblical days served a dual purpose. Fruits and vegetables sustained life and herbs had medicinal value, but all produced lovely blooms before their fruitful harvest. The pale blue flax flower [Exodus 9:31], for example, was made into linen; figs [Genesis 3:7] were said to cure boils.

Among the many lovely flowers in the garden are anemones, narcissus, tulips, lilies, iris, oleander and hyacinths. Yet only two, the rose and the lily, appear by name in the Old Testament. "I am the rose of Sharon and lily of the valleys. . . ." [Song of Solomon 2:1-2]. Some modern botanists and Biblical scholars believe that today's narcissus is the "rose" in Isaiah 35:1 and the oleander is the "rose" of Ecclesiastics 24:14. Others differ. Based on old texts and Hebrew and Greek translations, they believe that the narcissus, crocus or tulip may be the rose mentioned in the scriptures.

ABIGAIL LED US to a bedraggled, skimpy looking plant. "Our peacocks have been feasting again," she said ruefully. Three of them live down the road and they love to strut into the garden and peck away at the sorrel and mustard plants. The garden staff only pretends to be annoyed. They are really quite fond of the peacocks. One hen has laid five eggs and they've been sent to



Leaves—Numbers 11:5.

the zoo to ensure that they will be hatched safely.

Sorrel is one of the bitter herbs that the Israelites originally eat on Passover. The others are dandelion greens, endive and chicory [Exodus 12:8]. The horseradish in current use may have been a medieval substitution; in the early spring of the colder European climate, the traditional green herbs were not available at Passover.

The sage plant [Exodus 37:17-18] is generally deemed to be the model for the Jewish Menorah. Although it does not always have seven branches, the sage plant does have an even number of branches growing from a central branch in a pattern strikingly similar to the Menorah.

In one corner of the garden, papyrus grows in a little pool. It represents the bulrushes that the infant Moses lay on when he was cast adrift upon the Nile [Exodus 2:3,5].

Plants that cannot survive the cold weather of New York, such as the pistachio trees, are potted and transported to the Rosedale Nurseries in Westchester County for the winter. In the spring they're brought back to rejoin their hardier Biblical brethren.

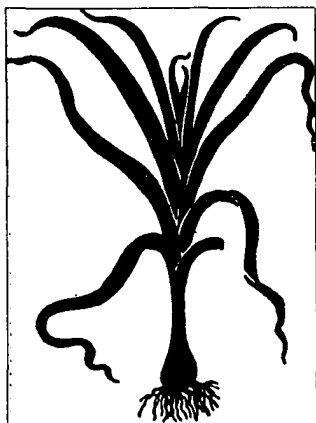
HAVING LEARNED, to our pleasure, what a Biblical garden is, we

now joined one of the guided tour groups at the cathedral. Building began on the cathedral in 1892 and has continued off and on throughout its history. Once again, after a lapse of 38 years, it is under construction. This follows the pattern of medieval churches in Europe where, after some years of idleness due to lack of funds, construction resumes and the original design is modified somewhat. All the work is being done by novice youths drawn from the neighborhood. They are apprenticed to master masons from English cathedrals and work under their direction. Each stone will be designed, numbered, cut and hand finished. A plaster model of the completed cathedral, as projected at present, stands in the cathedral shop.

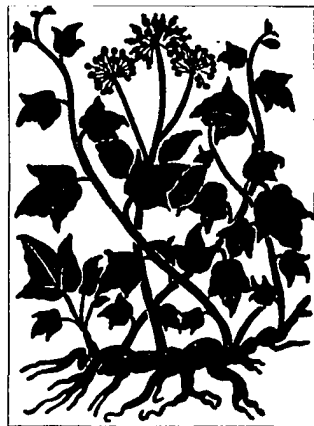
A treasury of Gothic architecture, sculpture, art and stained glass, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine contains works of art too numerous to mention. Among our favorites are the Renaissance tapestries, the great organ and the rose window of the West Front. Made of 10,000 pieces of superbly cut, stained glass, it ranks third among the great windows of the world.

We were surprised to note the "Bronze Auschwitz Figure" by the sculptor, Elliott Offner. It is a memorial to victims of the Holocaust.

We found a bigger surprise in the sanctuary. On either side of the high altar stand two 12-foot-high Menorah candlesticks, richly carved in bronze overlaid with gold. They follow the design of those that stood in Solomon's Temple, as depicted on the Arch of Titus in Rome. The first of their kind ever to be used in a Christian cathedral, the Menorah lights were given to the cathedral by Adolph Ochs, late publisher of the New York Times.



Leeks—Numbers 11:5.



English Ivy—II Maccabees 6:7.