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Garden testament: A local slice of paradise

Lorraine Eaton
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It all started in the Holy Land.

During a trip to Israel, Lee Kahn and her husband, Edward Kahn, toured the beginnings of Neot Kedumim, a 625-acre Biblical Landscape Reserve halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Back then, Neot Kedumim was little more than a plot of land on a rocky, eroded hillside, a sharp contrast to the Holy Land 2,000 years ago.

That ancient landscape is described in Deuteronomy 8:7-8: "For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive trees and honey."

Although Neot Kedumim was in its germination stage, the Newport News couple was struck by the idea that the botanists and historians could "create what they thought that the Holy Land looked like when the Hebrew people first got there," said Lee, now Lee Liverman. Edward died in 1983.

Back in the States, the couple asked permission from the board of directors of Temple Sinai in Newport News to develop a biblical garden on about an acre on the west side of the building. Soon the couple installed a drainage system and curving brick walkways and built a succah, a gazebo symbolizing the desert huts that ancient Israelites dwelled in after their exodus from Egypt.

The first beds were planted in 1976. At the time, Liverman wasn't really a gardener or a biblical scholar. But she read and researched, and she and her husband visited biblical gardens in the States, including the garden at Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York City.

At Temple Sinai, the couple planted pomegranate, almond, olives and herbs, selecting only flora mentioned in the Bible. Because the ancient Israelites were an agricultural people who negotiated with the Earth for sustenance, there was plenty to work with. In addition, the climate in the Holy Land is similar to ours.

Since 1976, much has changed. What's now the Edward E. Kahn Memorial Biblical Garden features more than 100 types of plants, each marked with a metal plaque listing the Hebrew name, the common name, the botanical name and a Bible verse that mentions it.

The dominant feature welcoming visitors to the garden is an immense Torah scroll perched atop a lattice. On it are these words from Genesis: "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed."

The Torah overlooks a sunny patch of herbs - rosemary, mint, rue and onion - planted each spring. The patch is framed by a date palm about 15 feet tall, the fourth Liverman has planted.

A bushy oleander, not yet in bloom, is planted at the entrance proper to the garden. Nearby is a spindly pomegranate, which has not yet borne its crimson fruit.

"When the Hebrews first entered Palestine, they saw all of this beauty, this color, these flowers," Liverman said.

To the right of the oleander is a little pond where a diminutive patch of bulrush juts from the water.



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"That's what was used to make the basket that Moses was floated down the river in," Liverman said, noting that along the Nile, bulrushes grow many times taller than these.

A Russian olive grows a few steps from the entrance, covered in slim, silvery-green leaves. Holy Land cultivars won't thrive here, but olives are essential to a biblical garden, Liverman said, because they were so critical to life in ancient times. Olives were used for cooking and as medicine, and the oil, squeezed using woven baskets, provided fuel for lamps.

Olive oil remains an important part of Jewish tradition. "When we begin our Sabbath on Friday night, the first thing we do is light candles, and candles represent the olive oil," Liverman said.

Hyssop, a spiky blue-flowering plant associated with Passover, also has been planted. According to Exodus, during the 10th and worst plague against Egypt, God sent the angel of death to kill the firstborn of each family. God told Moses to tell the Jews to mark their homes so they would be spared, or passed over.

The biblical passage, from Exodus, directs Jews to slaughter a lamb and "ye shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning."

A redbud, which not long ago had delicate pink blooms trilling up each branch, also has a dark reference in the Bible. The plaque underneath it quotes Matthew: "Then Judas... cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself" on a redbud tree.

Along the paths are quince, poppy, peony, figs, orchids and even dandelions, the scourge of American gardens but considered an edible bitter herb in biblical times.

Liverman also planted apricot and apple trees.

"Biblical scholars are not sure which it was" in the Garden of Eden, Liverman said. "Just to be on the safe side, we have one of each."

To follow the biblical theme, the fence is made of cypress, the wood Noah used to make the ark.

It's been more than 20 years since she started, and today Liverman is a master gardener who splits her time between Newport News and Virginia Beach. While she can no longer do all the work herself, she still tends the garden, making sure plants are pruned or replaced, and continues to add new ones, including 500 hard-to-get striped Israeli tulips that recently blushed into bloom.

The garden will soon be at its peak bloom time, a real treat for gardeners and those who seek a slip of solitude on one of the benches.

"When this is all green and blooming," Liverman said, "it's like -." She paused. "It's like paradise."

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