The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 5

5.4. THE GARDEN OF THE ALHAMBRA

By José Tito Rojo

Department of Botany at the University of Granada

The Alhambra is located on a hill that, in terms of landscape, dominates the city of Granada. It is not the only hill in such a situation, since next to the Alhambra there are two other hills and the three together form an indivisible whole; the others are the hill of the Generalife and the hill of the Torres Bermejas-Mauror. This configuration gives rise to an urban landscape in which the dialogue among elements, both plants and built elements, remain largely just as it was in the Middle Ages. This continuity of landscape is certainly a significant component of the heritage value associated with the monument. It allows the Alhambra to be perceived from numerous vantage points throughout the city of Granada and its historic districts, without entering the monument itself, and it also means that a special perception of the city can be gained in the views that visitors have from the Alhambra.

The Alhambra is landscape and characterizing the landscape are the forest surrounding it and the presence of a wondrous variety of gardens. Garden and Alhambra thus become two inseparable realities. The three hills of the Alhambra boast a collection of historic gardens, with examples of the highest level, generated over time, from the Alhambra’s beginning in the 13th century to our days.

Naturally the most important gardens are those from the medieval Islamic period, as irreplaceable pieces of garden history, with examples ranging from the large horticultural gardens of the Generalife to the smallest courtyards of the Nasrid palaces. One of them is perhaps the oldest ornamental garden to be conserved on the planet. This is the Generalife’s Patio de la Acequia (Courtyard of the Channel), which has been in existence since at least the 13th century with no indication of there having been any period of disappearance.

In this regard alone it is exceptional, since normally gardens from that period have gone through periods of abandonment and are known today thanks to archeological digs and replanting projects. The Patio de la Acequia, in contrast, has never stopped being a garden and although it has gone through
changes in its plants, it has at all times conserved its most essential features, which are the central axis formed by water and its lateral planted sections. It has always been an enclosed courtyard and, to a large extent, the character of the buildings around it has also remained unchanged.

The Alhambra also has an exceptional garden dating from the 14th century, the courtyard in the Palacio de Comares, traditionally known as the Patio de los Arrayanes (Court of the Myrtles) or the Patio de la Alberca (Courtyard of the Pool). This case is a very unusual example of continued presence. While in the garden mentioned above changes in the species grown were frequent, in this case there has been continuity in the plants throughout its existence. The oldest descriptions and its graphic representations always indicate the presence of two rows of myrtle (Myrtus communis) pruned systematically into a table-top hedge. It seems that on very few occasions was it ever abandoned or its trimming neglected.

This garden is clearly linked to the representation of power because it was situated in front of the main qubba of the palace, called the Salón de Comares or the Salón de Embajadores. Its evolution has been very calm and can be considered sort of a process of decantation, in that it has lost some elements previously present, such as the trees that grew there, but it has kept its essential structure, two green surfaces of myrtle, the central surface of water, green due to the presence of algae, set against the white of the marble flooring. The wonderful thing about this evolution, which has preserved what is most essential and set aside secondary elements, is that the garden’s current appearance seems to be the product of a minimalist design of a modern landscape but in fact is due to a centuries-long historic process. It is as if the exactness of its design were of such strength that it will admit no changes.

The basic structure of the Comares courtyard is the same one found in other courtyards of the Alhambra, a surface of water flanked by two stretches of vegetation. This is what recent historiography calls the tripartite courtyard. Most of them have gone through major transformations and in almost every case have been recovered thanks to archaeological discoveries, as in the Palacio de los Abencerrajes and the various palaces in the Partal area. Some Nasrid courtyards had other formal solutions, such as a pool or a fountain in the middle. Among these the most significant, the most fundamental of all the Alhambra gardens, is the Courtyard of the Lions, which after its recent restoration has an appearance similar to what its medieval state would have been like: a white marble
floor with a few orange trees. In the centre is the fountain that gives the courtyard its name, an exceptional piece of Andalusí art, singular in its configuration and its size.

In addition to the medieval gardens, there are others created over the centuries. Inside the Alhambra there are Mannerist gardens (Jardín de los Adarves), Romantic gardens (Lindaraja), and even 20th century gardens, such as the ones designed by Torres Balbás in the Partal. Also, on the hills outside the Alhambra’s walls, there are some garden areas of great interest in the Generalife, the Jardines Altos (Upper Gardens) planted in the 19th century and the Jardines Nuevos (New Gardens) planted in the 20th century. And on the hill that begins at the Torres Bermejas, there is the Carmen de los Mártires (1856) and the Carmen de la Fundación Rodríguez-Acosta (1918-26), one of the best gardens of modern Spain. In short, there is a wide array of noteworthy gardens. The primary aim of this brief summary is to highlight that the importance of the Alhambra as a whole cannot be adequately appreciated, with regards to its great heritage significance, without considering its garden-landscape component.