

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 4

4.9. ORNAMENTAL GARDENS, HORTICULTURE AND TRESS

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As an inseparable part of its palaces and built areas, the Alhambra's gardens and cultivated space, exceptional elements of adornment, sophistication and symbolism, appear one after another throughout the entire complex, bringing a component of transcendence, in both territory and time, to the landscape of the place.

As the centuries have passed and left their mark on the Red Hill, the variety of the gardens found here has expanded and become richer, and the number and singularity of the plant species found here provide clear evidence of the Alhambra's passage through various garden forms and tastes.

The medieval gardens, created during the Nasrid period, are the most important, because of their remote origins, the refined manner in which they integrate vegetation, water and even the buildings around them, and their evocation of the longed-for paradise described in the Koran.

Following the legacy left by earlier civilizations of the Mediterranean, the riad, courtyard gardens, are the most profound reflection of the Hispano-Islamic garden. Sometimes they are divided into four parts, such as in the Generalife's Patio de la Acequia or the courtyard that preceded today's Patio de los Leones; sometimes they are quite large, holding a sizeable pool, such as in the Arrayanes courtyard of the Palacio de Comares or the Damas courtyard in the Palacio del Partal. In courtyards, water has a prominent role as the essential expression of power and prosperity, and the reflections on the water allow the "reconstruction" of volumes, the illumination of shaded areas and the evocation of the sublime.

The Generalife was an almunia, a place of recreation for the Nasrid rulers, with sophisticated palaces, private spaces reserved for rest and large horticultural gardens devoted to food production. Next to it, running longitudinally, are the channels Acequia Real and Acequia del Tercio, which, along with various

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reservoirs and other hydraulic structures, facilitate the maintenance of the areas used for cultivation and also the private gardens in its interior.

The more modern examples of the wide array of gardens at the Alhambra include gardens dating from the Renaissance (Patio de la Reja and Patio de Lindaraja), from the 17th century (Jardín de los Adarves, in the Alcazaba), from the 19th century (Jardines Altos del Generalife), from the 20th century (Jardines del Partal and the new gardens of the Generalife) and even from the 21st century (area around the theatre).

The monument's vegetation has also changed over time, not just in terms of the number and variety of species, but also in terms of techniques and styles of cultivation and maintenance. In addition to the species traditionally used during the Nasrid period, such as wallflower, iris, jasmine, cypress and bitter orange, many new species from other regions and continents have been incorporated and are now fully integrated into gardening practices in Granada. These include boxwood, wintersweet, wisteria and miniature roses.

Of all the species present, if one had to be chosen to represent the gardens of this monument, it would most definitely be myrtle. Considered in the Arab world to be a plant endowed with "barakah" (Blessing, an invisible beneficent force), this bush with dense and fragrant foliage has been used in all periods and almost all of the Alhambra's gardens.

Although various ingenious hydraulic devices made it possible to build palaces and cultivate ornamental and horticultural gardens in the upper part of the Cerro del Sol, the predominant form of land use there would have been the dehesa, with its meadows and scattered oak trees enabling the space to be used for extensive livestock activity.

Today, dense groves of trees surround the monument, covering the slopes down to the Darro River and towards the city of Granada. Due to the military function of the Alhambra in the medieval period, back then there was no dense covering of trees around the fortress, especially on the slopes facing south and west, which descend relatively gently to the city. In contrast, the steep slope over the Darro River, opposite the Albayzín, must have been considered sufficient strategic protection and this,

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combined with its orientation, its shadiness and the water that leaked down from the palace's fountains, meant that a certain density of bushes and trees, such as Portuguese oak, holly oak and buckthorn, was allowed to grow.

The ongoing reforestation carried out by the successive alcaides (governors entrusted with the care of the Alhambra in Christian times) brought full coverage of the slopes by the 17th century, although it was not until the beginning of the 19th century, with the gradual introduction of species used in gardens in the rest of Europe, such as the planetree and the Indian chestnut, that we find what are now called the "Forests of the Alhambra".