

Gardens of Rodef Shalom

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PITTSBURGH (Allegheny Co.) — Elderhostels have been making a large hit around the world for American citizens over the age of 55 who wish to continue learning in all phases of life.

In conjunction with this, the city of Pittsburgh offers a pilot one-day Elderhostel program featuring subjects that range from the Heinz Chapel to the Rodef Shalom Biblical Botanical Garden.

Co-founder and director of the gardens and responsible for the Elderhostel event is Irene Jacob, who is also the author of "Gardens of North American and Hawaii, A Traveler's Guide."

Complete in biblical detail, the garden features a waterfall, a miniature Sea of Galilee, the River Jordan, and the Dead Sea.

While it does not occupy a large area, the grounds are lush and rich with a wide variety of Jewish researched Biblical plants.

Some of the plants used in modern day gardens can readily be traced to biblical times. A list at Rodef Shalom includes almond, apricot, bay laurel, Cedar of Lebanon, fig, ivy, narcissus, olive, quince, sycamore, tulip walnut, and watercress. Acacia, box bramble, castor oil tree, globe thistle, mulberry, and Russian olive.

Near the miniature Dead Sea, cotton, date palm, flax, henna madder, maritime squill, myrtle, pomegranate, and sea daffodil grow in abundance.

Barley, grape millet saffron, sorghum, sugar, and wheat line the banks of the River Jordan.

Who would have thought tulips would be old enough to be grown in a Biblical Garden and what gardener is not familiar with Star of Bethlehem, poppy, narcissus, crowfoot, chamomile, anemone, and crown daisy?

The huge onion plants so popular in many of today's gardens have Biblical roots as does giant grass, juniper, and willow.

Lemon grass, which grows in almost all herb gardens, had an ancient beginning. So did beans, black cumin, chickpeas, coriander, muskmelon, dandelion, endive, garlic, leek, lentil, lettuce, majorum, sage, thyme, watermelon, and wormwood.

As might be expected poison hemlock can be traced to the Bible.

And, of course, cattails, and papyrus where Baby Moses was laid so lovingly by his Mother traces back to the Bible as do Flowering Rush, Lotus, Rush, and waterlilies.

One of the most frequently mentioned sources of food in the Bible is the grapevine. It appears more than 300 times in every book of the Old Testament except Jonah and Ruth. Grapes were cultivated in all lands bordering the Mediterranean.

Barley has been grown since 5000 B.C. in Egypt and was the cheapest cultivated food obtainable. It is able to survive heat and drought better than any other cereal and ripen in shorter summers than wheat. King Solomon grew a large tonnage of barley to feed his 40,000 horses and unknown number of dromedaries.

Sorghum or great millet is also



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called "Jerusalem corn" and may have been the "parched corn" which Boaz gave to Ruth. It has been cultivated since 2000 B.C.E. It is a nonirrigated summer crop in Israel.

The saffron used in today's recipes was used by the Greeks to sprinkle on theater benches. The yellow star which Hitler forced the Jews to wear has roots with Saffron. The yellow color of the plant has always been used to mock Jews. The Greeks forced them to wear yellow hats. Perfume and nail polish were also made from Saffron.

Ezekiel 4:9 reads: "Take thou unto thee wheat and barley, and beans." The beans of the Bible grow to five feet. The small, white sweet-pea flowers are marked with a purple spot, followed by large green pods.

Beans in ancient times were mixed with wheat for flour, eaten fresh, boiled, dried or roasted. The stems were used for camel fodder.

Exodus 16:31: "And the house of Israel called the name thereof Manna;" which is believed to be like Coriander seed.

If eaten in excess, coriander is a narcotic. It is now and was used as a flavoring for food and beverages including gin and vermouth, perfumes, soaps, and had some medicinal uses.

Also in Exodus: "And ye shall take a bunch of Hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin."

Hyssop was used for purification of lepers and as a digestive aid.

If you have ever mistaken Wormwood for a more flavorful herb, you quickly learn of its bitterness if you taste it. This bitterness is mentioned several times in scripture. In Proverbs 5:4: "her end is bitter as wormwood" and, in Jeremiah, 23:15 "Behold I will feed them with wormwood and make them drink the water of gall."

Wormwood is also used as an insect repellent and as an antiseptic.

While we all know the modern day use of castor oil, it might surprise some to learn that it was once used for lighting. Castor Oil has a low freezing point and is used in the aviation industry today as a lubricant.

The small garden is framed with Biblical trees. Cedar grows abundantly in many parts of Pennsylvania and Psalm 92:13 reads: The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree; He shall grow like a cedar of Lebanon.

King Solomon used the cedar timber to build the temple in Jerusalem. The trees were floated 200 miles down the coast to Gaff and hauled another 25 miles across land to Jerusalem. It took 183,000 men seven years to build this temple.

A walk through Rodef Shalom Biblical Botanical Garden is a connection to ancient times. The tranquil setting brings the soul in touch with the earth and the many blessings God has bestowed upon us.

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