Edens beyond the razor wire

Even in the war-torn regions of Afghanistan, Palestine and Israel the gardening tradition endures, providing a peaceful distraction for many in the face of frightening adversity

Author and photography: **Lalage Snow**, photographer, journalist and film-maker

While gardens symbolise permanence, longevity, triumph in adversity, hope, growth and paradise, they also provide food, shade, peace, fuel, protection, privacy and escape. Nurturing them is an integral part of survival, resistance and therapy in times of war.

Having lived in Kabul on and off since 2010, it became clear to me that behind the headlines and images of chaos and bloodshed exists a country most people never see – a country with a colourful culture and a stubborn dedication to horticulture.

Once regarded as a 'City of Gardens', Kabul is struggling to define itself as a developing city in a maelstrom of security checkpoints, insurgent attacks and ongoing instability. Yet behind the razor wire and walls of »61

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

Ruined palace of peace

Mohammad Kabir (left) has created a garden for soldiers stationed at the Darul Aman Palace, which translates as 'abode of peace'; zinnias and tagetes flourish among other plants. Built in the 1920s outside Kabul, the palace has been proposed for restoration and use as the future seat of the Afghan parliament. 'I'm a poor man, but can live without food as long as I am surrounded by greenery and flowers,' says Mohammad, aged 105. The young soldiers stationed at Darul Aman Palace seem to appreciate his efforts: 'Green is happiness, green is peace. Who doesn't like that?' they say.

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

Private sanctuary

The private garden of Zabi Modjaddidi – one-time resistance fighter, ex-Governor of Kabul and son of a former Afghan President – is surrounded by security walls, guards and razor wire, but it serves as his place of peace. Zabi has lived both in the USA and Afghanistan, and many of the plants growing in his Kabul garden originally came from Virginia.

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

Public refuge

The first Mughal emperor Babur built the Bagh-e-Babur gardens in Kabul in 1528, and is said to have enjoyed so many long afternoons with concubines and fountains of wine here that he chose it as his final resting place.

Time has taken its toll on Babur's original garden. By 2001, three decades of foreign occupation, unrest, a devastating civil war and the iron-fisted Taliban rule rendered them nonexistent. Restoration of the site began in 2002 by the Aga Khan Foundation.

The gardens attract more than 300,000 visitors per year who pay 20 afghanis (25p) to enjoy the open spaces and picnic beneath shady trees. Few Kabulis can afford the luxury of their own patch of land; for many the gardens are one of the few green, open places in the city. Seasonal planting includes displays of dahlias and cannas.

The Bagh-e-Babur gardens are overseen by Engineer Latif, chief horticulturist (below right); there is a nursery on site where potted pelargoniums and oleanders grow protected from bitter Afghani winters – as well as from the searing summer sun.

private homes are verdant serenities, worlds away from the bedlam outside as Afghans keep the garden tradition alive.

Through photographing these gardens and listening to the personal stories of the gardeners, a different narrative to the ongoing conflict can be built, a far cry from the usual stories of Talibs, soldiers and insurgency.

Palestinian gardens

Away from Afghanistan, land and water have been at the core of the struggles between Palestine and Israel from Israel's origins. Access to, and control of, these resources is critical. Palestinians face the confiscation and destruction of land, homes, and water services. The tradition of nurturing nature remains strong and a powerful reminder of the importance of the land for which Israeli settlers and Palestinian farmers fight.

However, in spite of Israeli sanctions, Gaza is » 63

GAZA AND JABLAIYA, PALESTINE

Soilless rooftop garden

With the help of an international organisation, Abu Ahmed and his 18-year-old daughter Isra (above) grow vegetables on the roof of their Gaza home. 'There are no jobs so without this garden I couldn't feed my family. War for us is normal but living is hard; we just wait for rockets to hit us. My brother-in-law was shopping when shrapnel decapitated him. I buried him with my own hands,' says Abu. Fish waste provides nutrients for plants but the water is often saline. Yet he grows as much as he can. 'I do not have land but I can farm. This is my resistance.'

Palestinian grocer's garden

Naif Dubaidi from Jablaiya worked in Israel as a gardener, but the borders closed when Hamas came to power, so he opened a grocery shop. Of his garden (left) he says, 'It was beautiful but in 2009 it was shelled. I began rebuilding it as soon as the fighting was over; we all began to rebuild our lives. I can't live without green space.'

NIR AM, ISRAEL

Israeli shell garden

Shlomo, the owner of a garden in Kibbutz Nir Am, collects rocket shells for his sculpture garden. 'We get rocketed all the time,' he says. 'It's fun to play with the unexpected. My views are not liked in the kibbutz. Even though my own daughter was murdered by an Arab, I believe we should give the Palestinians what they want. It's the only solution.'

home to a huge array of private gardens, and their gardeners stand defiant in the face of adversity. Abu Ahmed gardens on his roof using hydroponics and is helped by his daughter, who still has nightmares from the last war. Naif Dubaidi lost his entire garden in the war in 2009 but immediately set about making a new one to forget the horror.

Israeli gardens

About 3km (2 miles) on the other side of the wall or separation barrier, kibbutzim communities live in the shadow of Hamas rockets yet, like their Gazan counterparts, their gardens have become a means of escaping the conflict. Shlomo in Kibbutz Nir Am makes sculptures out of spent rocket-propelled grenade cases for his garden. His daughter was murdered a few years ago but gardening keeps him 'sane', as it does for Mikhail Elimi, who lives in the border town of Sderodt which has been rocketed some 10,000 times since 2006.

These photographs examine the importance of gardens in war-ravaged countries as a means of creativity, therapy and hope, and for the common bond of humanity they instil. As Voltaire so fittingly concludes in his novella *Candide, or Optimism*: '*il faut cultiver notre jardin*' – we must cultivate our garden.

LALAGE SNOW

About the author

Lalage Snow is a photographer, journalist and film-maker living in Kabul and has worked on projects for organisations such as Oxfam and Afghan Aid, among others. Her first documentary *Afghan Army Girls* was shown earlier this year on Channel 4.

✤ To see further examples of Lalage's work, including many more of her war-garden photographs, visit: www.lalagesnow.com