



# Water

## Water in Islamic gardens



### What is an Islamic garden?

Islamic garden traditions originated in hot, dry countries where lush green gardens with fountains, pools and rills could represent paradise. These gardens are always rectangular and enclosed by a wall or screen so separate and protect them from the surrounding environment. This enclosure gives a sense of mystery and privacy when you step in.

Gardens follow the Islamic tradition of using beautiful geometric patterns for decoration. Pools and flower beds are always in geometric shapes like eight-pointed stars, octagons and rectangles.

These are arranged in a symmetrical design so that the whole garden forms a beautiful geometric pattern that expresses the Islamic ideals of harmony and order.



Images, left to right: Generalife gardens, Granada, Spain; Bahia Palace, Marrakech, Morocco; octagon and star fountain in Morocco.

### Feeling close to water

Islamic gardens are designed to make one feel close to water. Let's look at some of the features they use to do this.

#### Throne platforms

Throne platforms were a common way of making people feel close to water, e.g.

- **Shalimar Gardens, Lahore, Pakistan**  
The Mughal Emperor Shah Jahān had a throne built on a white marble island in a large lake (pictured, right) so that he could sit, surrounded by the vast expanse of water and the 152 fountains which spurted into it. He also had a throne platform built facing the bottom of a steep waterfall.
- **Nishat Garden in Kashmir, India**  
The Mughal Prime Minister Asif Khan had throne platforms built at the top of waterfalls so that he could sit with the cascade thundering beneath him.





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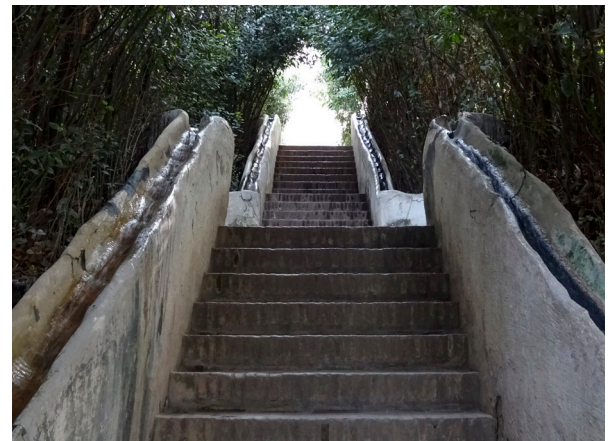
### Chabutras

Another popular way to make people feel close to water was to use a chabutra – a sitting platform surrounded by water. Chabutras are quite common in gardens and cities in India and Pakistan, for example the Tansen Chabutra in the Anut Tanao or ‘peerless pool’ in Fatehpur Sikri in Agra, India (pictured, left).

### Water channels

Paths and stairs flanked by channels of fast-flowing water are another method used in Islamic gardens to make people feel close to water, e.g.

- The Generalife gardens at the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain (pictured, right)
- The Samanid gardens in Bukhara, Uzbekistan
- The Abbasi Hotel tea garden in Isfahan, Iran



## Closeness to water in Indian gardens

### Swings

Ways of feeling close to water were especially popular in Indian gardens. For example, at Deeg Palace gardens in Rajasthan in India a swing was hung from a beautiful white marble arch so that one could swing out over a water channel lined with fountains.

### Pavilions

Rain pavilions were another favourite device in Islamic gardens in India, for example:

- **Garden of the Maidens of Honour, Udaipur, India.**

A pavilion of raining fountains was created in the centre of a pool to evoke a sense of maidens enjoying and dancing in the rain. The fountains themselves take the form of elephants spurting water from their trunks to produce the rain effect.

- **Deeg Palace gardens, Rajasthan, India**

The Keshav Bhavan pavilion was enclosed by curtains of water to recreate the effects of the Indian monsoon season. After cascading down, the water was forced up to the ceiling to make large stone balls roll around to make a sound like thunder.





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Images, left to right: Rain pavilion at the Garden of the Maidens of Honour, Udaipur, India; Marble arch which one held a swing in the gardens at Deeg Palace, Rajasthan, India.

### Closeness to water in small gardens

Water is just as important in smaller gardens in the homes of less wealthy people and in the gardens of teahouses and restaurants throughout the Islamic world.

- Gardens for tea drinking always have fountains or pools to sit near.
- Teahouse gardens in Iran and Uzbekistan have wooden beds called 'tahkts' which are often suspended over pools or water channels so that one can eat and drink with the water beneath them.
- The interior garden in a Moroccan riad usually includes a sahrîdj - a fountain or basin – in the centre in reverence to water as the vital life force of the home.



Above: A traditional riad in Morocco with a sahrîdj at its centre.





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### The 'Chahar Bagh' Garden Plan and its Symbolism

Many Islamic gardens are laid out in the traditional 'Chahar Bagh' (four gardens) design.

Chahar bagh gardens have a central fountain that flows into four rills (water channels) running through the horizontal and vertical axes to divide the garden into four equal parts.

The rills represent the four rivers of Paradise which flow to the four quarters of Heaven as described in the Quran.

### Examples of Chahar bagh gardens:

- Court of the Lions at the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain
- Bagh-e Fin garden in Kashan, Iran
- Taj Mahal garden in Agra, India.

### Gardens under which rivers flow...

The description of Paradise as 'gardens under which rivers flow' is used more than 30 times in the Quran. Some Islamic gardens give this feeling very strongly, such as the Generalife Gardens in Granada. Here, water emerges from rocky walls and from the ground and flows along rills before disappearing underground again.

### Water supplies

There is also a practical reason for the Chahar Bagh layout - water supply. In Iran, water is often transported to a garden from the mountains via a 'qanat', or underground canal, which prevents evaporation in hot weather. Bringing this water up into the garden requires an opening in the centre of the garden with rills to spread it in all directions for irrigation.



Images, from top: Taj Mahal Gardens, Agra, India; the Court of the Lions at the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain; water features at the Generalife Gardens, Granada, Spain; underground canal to transport water in Iran.





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### Water features in Islamic gardens

#### Pools

Pools are always a regular geometric shape: octagons, rectangles and eight-pointed stars are most common, but sometimes ten- and twelve-sided polygons and six-, ten- and twelve-pointed stars are used. Curved shapes are occasionally used but they are always regular and symmetrical.

Sometimes four small eight-sided pools are placed around a larger pool in a symmetrical arrangement.

Some pools are very still with a mirror-like surface; others are continually rippled by fountains.

Sometimes flowers or petals are scattered onto the surface for decoration and scent.



Images, left to right: 8-pointed star pool at Jardin Jnane Sbil, Fes, Morocco; flowers scattered onto the surface of a pool in India.

#### Fountains

Islamic gardens feature many small fountains rather than a couple of big ones. The type of fountains differs between countries of the Islamic world.

- The Alhambra and Generalife gardens in Granada in Spain are full of low, round, scalloped fountains with small bubbling jets subtly pulsing the water.
- The Bagh-e Fin garden in Kashan in Iran features low, rectangular white marble fountains set within rushing, turquoise-tiled water channels.
- In India, Pakistan and Iran, fountains are typically shaped like a short pillar and sometimes carved into a stylized lotus flower shape.
- Islamic gardens in Morocco, Turkey and Spain often use wall fountains, which bring water into the garden. Water falls from a spout into a tank, then flows into water channels in the garden.



Above: Tiled fountain at the Bahia Palace in Marrakech, Morocco





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Images, clockwise from top left: low, scalloped fountain at the Alhambra Palace Gardens, Granada, Spain; rectangular fountains at Bagh-e Fin Gardens, Kashan, Iran; wall fountains in Rabat, Morocco; carved pillar fountain in Udaipur, India.

### ‘Chadar’ waterfalls

In Pakistan, India and Iran there is a special type of man-made waterfall called a ‘chadar’. These are sheets of stone or white marble, set at angles between 30 and 70 degrees. Tiny scallops or V-shapes are carved into the surface to make the flowing water ripple. Sometimes chadars were placed facing sunlight so that the sun’s reflection would make the water bright.

A simpler ‘chadar’ can be seen in the streams flowing down the Jamshidieh Stone Park near Teheran in Iran. These streams are lined with little pieces of slate set on their edges to create ripple patterns on the water’s surface.



Above: Chadar waterfall at Shalimar Gardens, Lahore, Pakistan.  
Photo credit: Romero Maia [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gentle\\_waterfall\\_and\\_architecture\\_at\\_Shalimar\\_Gardens.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gentle_waterfall_and_architecture_at_Shalimar_Gardens.jpg)





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## Water in Islamic gardens QUIZ



### Quiz

See how much you can remember about water in Islamic gardens with this short quiz. Circle the correct answers.

**1. Which shapes are commonly used for pools in Islamic gardens?**

- a. triangles and stars
- b. octagons, circles and rectangles
- c. octagons, 8-pointed stars and rectangles

**2. Why do some Islamic gardens have chabutras or throne platforms?**

- a. for people to swim in water
- b. for people to feel close to water
- c. for people to drink water

**3. Which feature is used in some Islamic gardens to imitate a monsoon storm?**

- a. rain pavilion
- b. rain gazebo
- c. chabutra

**4. What is symbolically placed in the centre of a Moroccan riad?**

- a. a fountain or basin
- b. a bath
- c. a statue

**5. What do the rills represent in a traditional chahar bagh garden?**

- a. the four birds of Paradise
- b. the rivers of Babylon
- c. the four rivers of Paradise





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**6. What is a 'chadar'?**

- a. a large, natural waterfall
- b. a waterfall with scallops or V-shapes that create ripples in water
- c. a pavilion with rain-like water effects

ANSWERS  
1c; 2b; 3a; 4a; 5c; 6b