CHAPTER I

ANCIENT EGYPT
A HISTORY OF GARDEN ART

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UNDER primitive conditions, the cultivation of gardens could only begin when a wandering tribe settled. The nomad drove his herds across the open unfenced pasture-land. When, however, with the aid of the pickaxe he broke the ground, providing something in the nature of cultivated land and a fixed dwelling-place, he was compelled to erect a fence, in order to protect the homestead from the inroads of enemies and wild beasts. This enclosure, rudimentary as it was, formed the first garden. It was earlier than the farm, which could only be developed after fields had been formed with further fencing. It is in this particular sense that Herder was right when he called the garden older than the farm; nevertheless it was not a garden proper, because it was not yet separated from the rest of the land. Such as it was, it was quite close to the house, and contained fruit-trees and vegetables. The different kinds of plants had to be set out in regular beds because of the sort of attention they needed, for only by observing a certain order in arrangement was it possible to secure a satisfactory return.

We cannot, of course, study the earliest stages of gardening at first hand, and the prehistoric discoveries about cultivated plants throw no light on the manner or order of their actual planting. One can only say with certainty that the cultivation was not equal everywhere, nor according to any one plan; and that in a country won from the primeval forest the gardens had quite a different aspect from the oasis gardens still girt by the sandy desert.

In the very cradle of all human civilisation is a land which from the peculiar character of its soil and climate was bound to show an early and important development of garden cultivation. This land is Egypt. Here the Nile by its own independent work has wrested from the desert a valley, narrow and long. Every year its waters, pouring forth blessing and fruitfulness, take on themselves that work which in other places has to be carried out by the care and pains of men themselves—the work of conveying to the earth the nourishment first obtained therefrom. But this narrow strip of land, so specially favourable to the production of succulent stalks, was ill adapted for the cultivation of the larger kinds of trees or for long-lived vegetation. Whether or not Egypt had extensive woodlands in prehistoric times, as would appear from palaeontological discoveries, we cannot consider here, for it presupposes a different temperature and climate. We can only remark in passing that a rainless sky must have checked the development of forest, especially in Upper Egypt. If the kings wanted to enjoy the pleasures of the chase, they had to be content with the neighbouring desert. In pictures of the Old and the Middle Period
we find hurdles, set up for hunting purposes, apparently only with the object of a battue. Among the desert creatures we find stags, and this almost implies forest.

The establishment of large trees could only be aimed at in high places, or at the edges of the valley where the waters of the stream did not reach during the inundations.

It could only succeed from the very start through man’s most diligent care. Watering and the provision of nourishment for the land and its crops needed skill and artifice. The waters of the Nile were brought to the higher and more distant parts of the country by an elaborate network of canals, regulated by dams, terraces, and sluices, and were then drawn up by the help of a well-sweep (shadoof or shaduf). On one arm of the pump-handle hung a weight, on the other a bucket, and the water was poured out on plants, trees, and fields. Just as we see it in pictures, thousands of years old, so can it be seen now (Figs. 1 and 2). It is obvious that with so much labour entailed, only such trees and plants would be considered as were found useful enough to repay a man for his trouble. It was precisely from the profit-making care of plants that all horticulture arose. Edible fruits, timber, and shade—these the Egyptian demanded and obtained from his garden.

Though it is only the New Period that has given us pictures of a systematic arrangement and grouping of different plantations in one, that is, of enclosures which can be considered gardens in our sense, there is yet undoubted evidence in the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties, and still more in the Middle Period, of plots laid out for trees, vines and vegetables. These pictures show the individual work of the garden. They show how the gardener waters the land, how he plucks the fruits from the trees, how he gathers the ripe bunches of grapes, and how he pours libations to the gods for a blessing on his work.

First among the trees which belonged to the earliest form of Egyptian garden is the sycamore ([Editor’s NOTE: Or sycomore, for doubtless the sycomore of Luke xix. 4 is meant. The “sycamore fig” is Ficus sykomoros. The common foliage sycamore, or “false plane,” is Acer Pseudo-platanus]). It is very often mentioned, and in the old records the sign
for Sycamore often stands for Tree in general. It seems that, according to a very ancient belief, a sycamore stood under the canopy of heaven beside both the rising and the setting of the sun; it was supposed to be of malachite, perhaps to indicate its imperishable green hue. The fruit and the wood of this tree are both of use; in its shade the living rejoice as well as the dead, and the peasant honours it as especially sacred, and sacrifices to it the fruits of the earth (Fig. 3). There is a feeling of close sympathy between the dweller in the Nile Valley and this tree, expressed in a little poem which depicts the tree as the friend of lovers. On the day when "the Garden holds its festival," when the tree is in all the glory of its flowering, it sends a message to the maiden:

The little sycamore,
Which she planted with her own hand,
She moves her lips to speak.
How fair are her lovely branches!
She is laden with fruits
That are riper than the jasper.
Her shade is cool,
She lays a little letter in a girl's hand,
The head gardener's daughter,
She bids her hasten to the well-beloved:
"Come and stay among thy maidens.
We are drunken if we would go to thee,
Ay, before we have tasted aught.
The servants who obey thee
Are coming with their vessels;
Beer of every kind they bring
And every kind of bread,
Many flowers of to-day and yesterday
And all refreshing fruits.
Come, and make it fine to-day,
To-morrow and next day, three days long.
. . .
Sit in my shade."
Her friend sits on her right hand,
She makes him drunken
And yields to what he says.
. . .
But I am dumb,
And say not what I see.
I will say no word."

The pictures of the Old Period show how they planted the trees at regular intervals, how they collected the fruit, then cut the tree down and disposed of its wood, or else when it was ready to cut down allowed the young goats to eat the foliage. And in early days they seem to have used animals to help in their harvesting. The monkeys had to help gather figs (Fig. 4), and were allowed to enjoy some of the fruit themselves so long as they left the men's share in the baskets. The fig-tree is no less important to the ancient Egyptians than the sycamore. Near to these in importance stand two kinds of palm,
the date and the doum (Dom), the date especially being very much used, and in many ways.
There was also the acacia, with which perhaps the tree (Minusops Schimperi) must be counted that the ancients called Persea. [EDITOR’S NOTE: The Sunt-tree (Acacia nilotica) must be remembered. Together with the sycomore and the tamarisk, it was abundant.
The Lebek (Albizcio or Acacia Lebek) was imported. As regards the Persea, the Persea

[FIG. 5. GODS PAINTING THE KING’S NAME ON THE YSHIT TREE, TEBES: TEMPLE OF RAMSES II]

gratissima of modern botanists is the avocado or alligator pear, a West Indian tree. Neither it nor the modern Minusops is of the Leguminose, like the true Acacia.] Together with the sycomore it belongs to the group which in the earliest times fixes the character of Egyptian tree-culture, although their native land was not Egypt. Besides these there was also a sacred tree held in high honour, which is called in the writings Ished—a fruit-tree whose identity is not really fixed. This ished (yshit) is the tree of history, on which the gods depict the name and the deeds of the king (Fig. 5).

In the New Period, the species are far more numerous, and the writer Ennene, who
lived about 1500, enumerates on the inscription intended for his tomb the trees which he planted in his lifetime. He gives a list of twenty different sorts, of which some are not yet identified. The old kinds are also given in an extra list, and comprise no fewer than 73 sycomores, 170 date palms, and 120 doum palms. In the New Period the want of forest was in part compensated for by a great number of sacred groves. Every one of the forty-two districts, into which Upper and Lower Egypt were divided, had its own temple with its sacred grove attached. From very early times trees were held sacred by the Egyptians, but now each of these temples had a particular tree sacred to itself, which was chiefly, if not exclusively, cultivated in the temple garden. If we may judge by the inscriptions, the greater temples must have owned very extensive lands.

Next to trees the Old Period seems to have valued vineyards. We do not know the actual beginnings. Pictures of the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties show the whole story of the grape, how it begins to ripen, how guards chase away the birds with sticks, how it is gathered, how it is trodden, and how the must is poured into tall, pointed vessels without feet. In the earliest days they seem to have grown the vines on arbours; that is, they stuck up stakes and set a transom across. The oldest hieroglyph for Wine shows this (Fig. 6). But even in the Old Period they began to substitute posts for the rough wooden props, and from these there came in the New Period their beautiful, finely painted pergolas. The arbours were often round, which made them prettier (Fig. 7), and a second hieroglyph shows that this form was a deviation from the original straight lines. In the Middle Period, and still more in the New, these ideas were developed in a more and more pleasing way. Right on into the New Period vineyard arbours were the centre and chief ornament of all gardens.

As to the abundance of vegetable products among the ancient Egyptians, we need only consult their sacrificial vessels, their baskets of fruits, and their festival processions. There are long rows of men carrying baskets laden with fruit on their shoulders, and ears of corn or papyrus in their hands; between them are other beautifully woven baskets, piled high with every sort of garden food. But the Middle Period has the fewest pictures of vegetable gardens: one picture of Beni-Hassan shows (in very poor perspective) square beds, planted with green vegetation (Fig. 8). A canal ending in a round pond has green tendrils all about it, as though to indicate that it lies within the garden; beside it two men are working, bringing water and emptying it over the beds. They would seem to be important persons in the service of their master, for both their names are perpetuated, not only in an inscription over their heads, but in the large picture of the servants bringing gifts to place on the sacrificial tables of the dead, where our two gardeners appear with their names again noted, Neter-Necht and Nefer-Hetep; they are bringing to their master the fruits of the earth obtained by their own labour, in baskets carried over their shoulders on a crossbar.
On another picture of the same period the beds are marked out in squares like a chess-board, with many kinds of plants in them; as gardeners are here watering the land, there has to be a canal or a pond to complete the scene (Fig. 9). Above stands a row of pot plants, an early example of ornament that became common later on. To the left of the garden is a vine arbour, where men are in the act of plucking ripe grapes. The same wine harvest is shown at the Beni-Hassan tomb, but here the arbour is most elegantly furnished, and covered over—which is rare in so old a work.

Much is told by pictures of the time before the New Period; but even at that time utility was not everything, and rich people, from the earliest days, made gardens round their houses in the country, where they meant to retire after their busy careers; we see this from an inscription on the tomb of Meten, an official and high priest who lived under the last king of the Third, and the first of the Fourth Dynasty. Meten built himself a wonderful villa with a wall round it, which enclosed a square 105 metres in length each way. His house was well built, and supplied with all the necessaries of life; it was enclosed by trees both for ornament and use—palms, figs, and acacias. Several ponds with green surroundings made a home for water-fowl. Before the house stood arbours, and two fields of vine plantations yielded him every year an abundant supply of their fine wines. There is no picture that shows the actual arrangement of these plantations, which afforded so much pleasure to their owner; we must pass over 1500 years, to find descriptions like...
Ancient Egypt

Meten’s in the New Period, which will, however, present precisely the same pictures of the order of plants and buildings, though in a highly advanced state of culture.

The plans given in Egyptian paintings of houses and grounds are not easy to understand without further information. The wish to put into one picture all the things they liked and thought good, and so to have them all at the same time, led this happy-go-lucky folk into absurdly poor perspective: they wanted to see the house inside and outside, front view and back view, everything that grew in the garden, at the back or at the side, all at once. So a drawing would be partly a ground-plan, partly an elevation, and again partly a bird’s-eye view. But if one’s eye has once learned to change over these drawings and interpret them in our own style, the instruction one gets from them is very many-sided.

It is then quite easy to understand a picture that comes from the tomb (at Thebes) of a high official who served under Amenhotep (Amenophis) III. (Fig. 10), although there are certain difficult points in its interpretation. It presents a complete plan of the villa, mostly as a bird’s-eye view. As it was at Meten’s country house, the square of the piece of land is circumscribed by a wall, which in this case has round tiles on the top. You enter from the front by a large entrance gate, or by one of two little side wicket-gates. A shady avenue follows the wall outside, and a canal outside that; this adds to the feeling of complete seclusion which the picture suggests. You step through the door straight into the house, which is shown much too large in comparison with its surroundings, the doors being the only break in the façade. No doubt the artist wished to suggest that the owner was a very rich person, by emphasising the beauty of his front gate. Here too was the porter’s lodge, perhaps also a reception-room for such visitors as were not allowed in the main building, which was hidden away in the garden. Between the gate and the house, occupying the whole of the middle space, was the vineyard. It consisted of four arched arbours, their rafters supported by posts. A path is left open in the middle, forming the chief approach to the house from the gate; and from this path two side-walks lead directly to the covered ways.

It is hard to reconstruct the master’s house, which is drawn too small. It perhaps had a front hall, like most Egyptian houses, with three rooms below and an upper story. There were flower-beds at the side, and shady avenues around. The whole upper garden is intersected in symmetrical lines by avenues of sycomores, and different palms—date and doum palms.

In other ways, too, a feeling for strict symmetry is shown, for the garden is carved out by walls into eight separate similar parts, only differing in their size. The chief
section (with the house on it) includes the vineyard; and besides avenues it has two small and attractive open pavilions with flower-beds in front, overlooking two rectangular ponds, whose banks appear to be bordered with green grass; on the water there are lotuses swaying, and ducks swimming about. Two similar ponds, but pointing in a different direction, are nearer the front, on either side of the gate, and here again a space is filled by two plantations of trees, fenced in a peculiar way. There are two more avenues composed of all three kinds of trees, planted alongside the walls, standing alone and cut off by a low wall. Thus we have here (1) a square of land surrounded by lofty walls, (2) the dwelling-house, carefully hidden away, shaded by trees, enlivened by the pond and its water-fowl and green border, (3) the vineyard in the middle with all the trees of different kinds grouped about it in avenues. We find nearly all these designs in Meten’s garden; and if we look at the beautiful regular plan, the fine alternation of trees, planted with prudent forethought, the elegant shape of the sunk ponds, the judiciously disposed buildings in the garden—we recognise with astonishment that we here have a formal garden in an advanced state of development on the very threshold of our history. Rhythm, symmetry, and a happy combination of elegance and utility—a blend often desired in later days of hope and struggle—these have been fully attained, and with them a delight in quiet communion with Nature, expressing as she does the sense of beauty in orderliness. Moreover there is a tendency to separate particular parts—a scheme often met with in later times. The next pleasing feature is the complete supremacy of the garden, to which all buildings—the dwelling-house included—are subordinate.

With the later excavations at El-Amarna the form of the town house becomes more clear. In suburban houses the pylon-like entrance gate hardly ever leads into the garden. Straight ahead you get the large pond, which at El-Amarna seems to have been always filled from underground water. Behind the pond, and often at the side as well, we find in the best houses a kiosk with pillared hall and a terrace leading up. The dwelling-house is generally at the side, nearer to the street.

By the help of a ground-plan like this, it is easy to complete and explain many other garden pictures. There is a Theban picture, from a tomb of the same date as the one just described, which (Fig. 11) gives a visiting scene at a great house; here too the house stands inside the garden enclosed by a wall. The entrance door leads straight into the garden; and thence the visitors proceed to the house, which has garden ground all round it (this the artist indicates by one large tree and two little plants behind the house); there is a second way in at the back. The house has an open porch in front, where the guests, who have walked through the garden, are politely received. The most conspicuous place seems to have been allotted to the vine arbour, where the ripe grapes hang on a pergola with pretty columns, and among the trees are figs, pomegranates, and sycomores, which in their own avenues provide fruit and grateful shade. The picture shows no pond; but water is a necessity—an Egyptian garden is unthinkable without it—and it is unusual not to have it shown in a picture.

There is another garden of an opulent kind where guests are being received (Fig. 12). From the canal which waters the villa one arm reaches out into the garden, and widens at the end into a tank. Around it are avenues of trees, which are also continued up to the house. Such T-shaped canals are often found in gardens. We can see from the Apoué garden in a tomb at Thebes how tall things grew with care and good watering (Fig. 13).