



USING AND CREATING OUTDOOR SPACES TO MEET WITH GOD

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*...Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries...¹*

Introduction

In this project I explore the use of gardens in spiritual direction. I will discuss how people use gardens in spiritual direction and the features and qualities of a garden that draw people to connect with God, either as part of spiritual direction or in some other way. I will provide some suggestions for creating and using a garden environment as a space to meet with God.

Background

Many people encounter God through creation. It is the first place humankind encountered God, in the Garden of Eden. God is actually described as planting a garden in Genesis 2:8, a deliberate act following creation where provision of trees for food, shade and covering was an indicator of God's care and intentionality. God met Adam in the garden.

The Psalmist writes,

He makes springs pour water into the ravines;

it flows between the mountains.

¹¹They give water to all the beasts of the field;

the wild donkeys quench their thirst.

¹²The birds of the sky nest by the waters;

they sing among the branches.

¹Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. 1856. "Aurora Leigh" Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1822727-aurora-leigh>.

¹³ He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;
the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.

¹⁴ He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate—
bringing forth food from the earth:

¹⁵ wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts.²

In the Prophets, the garden becomes an image for city communities when they flourish, when life is at peace and well-ordered and just, and all can thrive.³ In Wisdom literature the garden becomes an image of the self and the garden becomes the self and speaks of God's indwelling and shaping.⁴

A garden is part of creation and more. It is a microcosm of creation - a deliberate selection of plants and natural and manmade objects which exemplify and enhance the natural environment to create a particular atmosphere – usually one of peace and wonder. In a garden we encounter the rhythms of life as a garden changes through the seasons, encompassing new life, growth, fruitfulness, loss and barrenness. We see unpredictable notes of joy with passing birds and insects and unexpected emergence of flowers. These things speak to us powerfully and can make us aware of God's work of grace in our own lives.

As we grow in our spiritual journey, our lived experience of God changes and we find him in places other than our "normal" traditions and routines. Gardening teaches us to look for God in our daily activities.⁵ We draw close to God there, whether through gardens which have been skilfully created,

² Ps 104:10-15

³ Joel 2:3; Isa 5:1-7; 58:6-12; Ezek. 36: 33-36 as quoted by Smith, David I.. 2018. "Schools, ideals, gardens." International Journal of Christianity & Education 22(1): 3-7.

⁴ Psalm 1, Prov. 3:13-18

⁵ Sine, Christine. *To Garden with God* (US: Mustard Seed Associates, 2009).

through working in gardens and becoming more aware of God through the process, or just spending time in some physical locations where there seems to be a tangible sense of God's presence.

Gardens are places where God is seen in creation, as described by Mechthild of Magdeburg.

"A fish cannot drown in water,

A bird does not fall in air.

In the fire of creation,

God doesn't vanish:

The fire brightens.

Each creature God made

must live in its own true nature;

How could I resist my nature,

That lives for oneness with God?"⁶

Hildegard of Bingen developed a principle of *viriditas*, which can be translated as greenness or greening power - readiness in plants to receive the sun and transform it into energy and life – and she recognised this as the inherent connection between the physical world and the divine presence. This was foundational to her understanding of the Holy Spirit, the vivifying breath that animates all living things. She fostered a nature-centred pneumatology that allowed for a vibrant and immanent earthly Spirit, en fleshed, embodied and encountered in forest, field and flower. The garden and the whole of the earth was understood to be the place where God's Spirit and our spirit meet to produce fecundity: holistic wellness for the person and a profound mutual relationship with the natural world. The earth was the medium by which she encountered and understood God.⁷

⁶ Mechthild of Magdeburg. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* c1250-1282 (Bold mine) IN Stephen Mitchell. *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry* (USA, 1993).

⁷ DeJong, Mary. "A Holy High: How Hildegard Found her Inspiration Grounded in the Garden." October 2017. Retrieved from [https:// theotherjournal.com/2017/10/16/holy-high-hildegard-found-inspiration-grounded-garden/](https://theotherjournal.com/2017/10/16/holy-high-hildegard-found-inspiration-grounded-garden/).

In the Celtic tradition, places where God seems particularly near in a tangible way are described as “thin” places. Ffald Y Brenin is one such thin place, and has been described as a “well of refreshment,” a “place of encounter,” and a “peaceful place of rest where blessing abounds.”⁸

Richard Roberts, one of their trustees writes, “At times, people find it easy to be aware of God at the centre. It is as if the veil between heaven and earth, the spiritual realm and the physical realm, is drawn aside...”⁹ He discusses the question of how it (and other places) become thin places.

“I suspect there are many factors involved, including ongoing continual prayer, the faithfulness of the team and the beauty of creation. ...there is no quick fix “impartation” that can make somewhere become a thin place. There is another factor that can be involved, related to the spiritual history of a particular place. A thin place is often somewhere where the Kingdom of God has been present in power.”

We cannot by our own effort make somewhere a thin place, but we can pray, be hospitable and seek God’s presence – and these actions are likely to change the spiritual atmosphere around us.

In the Zen tradition gardens have a different intention, with the aim to empty oneself rather than to see God and meet him through the medium of a garden. Zen garden design includes water for stillness and empty space for reflection. Rocks represent mountains, or islands in an ocean represented by gravel, and plants are subtle. The sound of wind in bamboo and its movement teaches the principle of having an “empty heart” and bridges represent the journey between planes of existence. Zen gardens also involve a slowing down and a stilling of the heart and receptiveness - something Christians also aim for - whereas garden design informed by the Christian tradition points to the creator with fullness and richness and glorying in fruitfulness and abundance.

⁸ “About.” Retrieved from <https://ffald-y-brenin.org/about/>

⁹ Roberts, Richard. “Living in a Thin Place.” May 12 2022. Retrieved from https://ffald-y-brenin.org/living_in_a_thin_place/.

Having said that, a contemplative garden in the Christian tradition can involve a journey of moving into a place of emptiness and stripping away – which may be followed by moving to a place of abundance. Gardens may follow a narrative theme of moving from creation to the fall, judgement (giving of the Law), and salvation with the coming of Jesus, culminating in the crucifixion and resurrection.¹⁰

So how are gardens used in spiritual direction? Spiritual directors were surveyed about what they found valuable about gardens for themselves as well as in their work with directees.

When considering themselves as directors, there was a wide range of responses. Some involved the physicality of being and using all the senses while others noted the benefits of space, stillness and solitude in hearing God speak.

Seeing blossoms, hearing birds, smelling fragrance of flowers and leaves, observing the changing seasons and feeling the fresh air, the breeze and warm sunshine on our backs were all ways of being physically present and embodied, helping directors to stay grounded and not focusing just on the mind, or over spiritualising life. This lived unity of being consciously present in our bodies is one of the real strengths a garden offers. Walking through a garden regularly was described as being a way of being with God, and the physical practice of actually gardening was also described as a helpful way to connect with God.

A number of responses mentioned the value of solitude and space as a place to hear from God and a time where they could mull over things in God's company. The metaphors of life seen in a garden speak powerfully:

¹⁰ The contemplative garden at Eastwest College of Intercultural Studies designed by Lynda Jellyman is one such garden

God always meets me there in wonderful sustaining ways – speaking so clearly often through creation.¹¹

To be, to gaze at plants, potter around, view changing foliage and blossom, observe the cycle of spring growth after the despair of winter, to watch seedlings grow and bloom, and to harvest one's own produce are metaphors through which God speaks, beckoning into deeper explorations that are a rich source for contemplative prayer. The unscripted surprise of nature breaks through in unexpected moments, inviting us to notice and stay with the giftedness of such moments. Gardens were described as offering restfulness, refreshment and growth.

Several directors talked about using gardens with directees during retreats and Quiet Days as an option for times of creativity, prayer and contemplation. They also spoke of the benefits of looking out on the garden during Spiritual Direction sessions.

...on at least 3 occasions during SD, monarch butterflies have appeared flying around bushes outside the window facing the directee with such exquisite timing that this became a profound experience of God's love and care and real presence for them in those moments. Noticing and staying with such moments of synchronicity – when something being processed by the directee coincides with a 'happening' in the outside garden" – was profound.¹²

Directors noted the impact of directees walking through the garden to arrive at a spiritual direction session, giving them time to reflect, decompress, centre, quieten and prepare their heart and mind.

The natural surroundings seem to invite and enable an inner dropping down which directees often comment on as they arrive for a session. This seems to open a doorway to the heart's

¹¹ Cheryl Harray, questionnaire.

¹² Response to questionnaire.

*capacity to be present to the Now and to see and hear God from a different place within them.*¹³

One directee's attention was held by water drops suspended on leaf-edges then dropping into the pool below, and then took the time to take photos with her phone as this spoke into



*her own journeying with God, which then became the focus of our conversation and subsequent conversations.*¹⁴

Attending to God's presence in creation was an important step in attending to God's presence in all places. Several mentioned the benefit of actually gardening with the directee – pulling weeds, pruning and so on. Sue Pickering also suggests this as an idea for a retreat,¹⁵ and this was also suggested by the owner of a Quiet Garden as a way to get alongside people wanting to experience God's presence.¹⁶

Figure 1 Olive Tree walk looking toward Cross, Eastwest College of Intercultural Studies

Others mentioned
directees finding

metaphors in their own gardens which they explore afterwards themselves. Only one director mentioned meeting with a directee in the garden, which she did on occasion. I can imagine that a garden could become a distraction in a time when the emphasis is on focusing and going deeper – though, as mentioned, it can also provide a source of metaphor and connection with God.



Figure 2 Prayer Kneeler, Eden Community Church

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Response to questionnaire.

¹⁵ Pickering, Sue. *Creative Retreat Ideas* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019).

¹⁶ Deb Borlase, Bazdel Garden. (Listed on the Quiet Garden movement website).



Figure 3 Labyrinth at Eastwest College of Intercultural Studies

Directors were also asked what features of a garden they found particularly useful. Some of these were very practical, such as an indoor space to use if weather is bad with a sofa or bed, desk, chair, writing and drawing materials, CD player (or Bluetooth speaker), tea and coffee facilities, provision of morning and afternoon tea, privacy, and a toilet. Along the same lines was the repeated suggestion of having a seat or seats so the person using the garden could sit and reflect, and ensuring there was some shade.

Other suggestions were of man-made features to incorporate in the garden. Sculptures, a water feature, stones with words on them, a cross, a plaque or altar, a prayer stand/ kneeler and a prayer



Figure 5 Green Hope sculpture, Vaughan Park Anglican Retreat Centre

labyrinth all came into this category. Another suggestion was to include a sanctuary – which could take the form of a natural chapel or a space in front of a cross, an altar or similar.



Figure 4 Celtic Cross, Vaughan Park Anglican Retreat Centre

Relating more to the physical layout and design of a garden included having nooks and crannies and surprises rather than having a whole space visible at one time. Other things that people found significant were having green space, walking paths, large old trees for prayer and contemplation, birdsong, as well as access to adjacent wider areas of beach, river and bush. Views, water, wind, natural fragrance and a soft

lawn were all mentioned as being important, as was a garden design that allowed people to be near others or in solitude.



Figure 6 Contemplative garden with labyrinth formerly owned by spiritual director

The Quiet Garden Movement nurtures access to outdoor space for prayer,

reflection and rest in a variety of settings and creates opportunities for people to experience silence, restfulness and contemplative practices. It is a worldwide movement with over 300 gardens listed on its website and includes gardens in New Zealand.¹⁷ These gardens run regular events and quiet days as well as providing places for people to spend time in silence and wait on God. On their website they set out expectations for those hosting.¹⁸

Creating a Garden for meeting with God

As I look at our own spaces available and look to creating a contemplative garden, some of my key discoveries are that we work with what we have. This includes existing nature – whether it is mature trees, views, neighbouring bush, beaches or rivers. We can plant to create rich environments with fragrant plants and flowers, plants that attract wildlife and plants that move in the wind. Butterflies

¹⁷ September 2022. Retrieved from <https://quietgarden.org/>

¹⁸ "Hosting." October 2022. Retrieved from <https://quietgarden.org/join/hosting/affiliate/> "Quiet Gardens vary greatly in size and design. They can be large or small, manicured or wild. The key feature is that the space is set aside, even just for a few hours, for quiet reflection.

The outdoor space will act as both a context and focus; in which to share the inner search for wholeness, natural beauty and silence, and in which ancient Christian wisdom and the contemplative tradition can be explored.

A private home may offer Quiet Garden space by appointment, or at set regular times with or without teaching or 'input'... It will be the host's responsibility, together with the supporting team, to value and validate 'stillness' and 'awareness' in their Quiet Garden. The outdoor space is primarily not a space for talking but for being. For some visitors it may be their first experience of silence so they may need some encouragement and help in knowing how to quieten and become inwardly still.

To help people feel welcome and comfortable, a Quiet Garden usually has some shelter and access to toilet facilities, as well as the possibility for visitors to receive simple refreshments."

and bees, birds, beetles and frogs are all things that draw the heart towards the creator. Including elements that change seasonally is important as a way to reflect on changes in our own lives and provide opportunity for metaphors to be seen and experienced. Water can provide both sound and opportunity for visual reflection as well as being a metaphor for life and for cleansing – and much more.

Paths help the participant to experience a journey, especially if not everything can be seen at once so there is an element of discovery. Seating places provide a place to pause, slow down and reflect as well as being spots for solitude. Other built and sculptural elements can provide a focus for prayer and worship – whether a labyrinth, a cross, an altar, a poem or psalm, or a sculpture. While we might want to have a “thin” place where God is near, this can’t be manufactured but may develop in a place where people pray and worship, offering our own hospitality and generosity to make this possible.

For directors in settings with no access to gardens or if meeting with directees in the evening or in bad weather, there are still ways to be aware of God’s presence in the created world as part of a direction session. It is useful to be aware of all the senses - the sound of wind, rain, water, the warmth of the sun, the presence of growing plants in a room, the fragrance of flowers or leaves. If you use an assemblage you can consciously include living things showing the cycle of life – such as seedlings or blossom in spring, or seed pods and autumn leaves and bare branches at other times of year as a way to connect with the created world and God’s voice to be heard there.

Conclusion

Above all, creating a garden for meeting with God involves making ourselves and our gardens open to God and to those who seek him, trusting God to do the rest.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

The following questionnaire was sent out to spiritual directors.

1. Do you have or use a contemplative or prayer garden?
2. If so, what aspects of the garden do you find most valuable?
3. Do you use the garden with directees and if so, how?
4. Would you be willing to be contacted directly to talk more about the garden and how you use it?

Appendix 2

How to use your time in the garden

Slow down, pause and observe. Be still and take time to notice what is around you and be present in the moment. Consciously put aside your thoughts and concerns. You may like to wander around first and explore your surroundings and come back to a particular spot, or else walk until something draws your attention.

- What do you see? Hear? Smell? Feel? Taste?
- Is there something that particularly captures your attention? Observe it closely. Spend time with it. What emotions does it evoke in you?
- You may want to interact with what is around you. Drop twigs in the water, touch leaves, smell flowers, pick up insects or pull out weeds.
- Is God speaking to you about through what you have observed? About himself? About you or your situation?
- If he is, you may like to respond in some way - take a photo, draw, pick something up, write something or talk to God about what you observe.
- Sometimes there is no particular sense of God's presence or revelation. If that is the case, rest in the peace of the place and move on.

Appendix 3

This poem is included as an additional extra, encapsulating the essence of meeting God in nature.

Untitled Poem by John Roedel¹⁹

lately, when I need to pray

I go to the church that
has no doors

and where the walls are made of carved granite ~

I sit under its moving roof
on a pew that smells
like fresh pine

and fold my hands quietly until God joins me ~

here in this most ancient of churches,
I watch a dozen fat rainbow angels
dance in the baptismal font

and wonder when I too will be made anew ~

there is a special kind of holy quiet here
that rings much louder than any fat
church bell I have ever known

and the silence often rattled my ribs ~

its choir loft is high up in a birds nest
and its confessional is a breeze
that asks me to speak my sins

and I do, and then they are carried away ~

the longer I sing psalms in this church
the shorter my memory for all of
my past mistakes become

and that is when I hear the voice of Love speak

“oh tired light, oh wounded heart,
oh my child of crumbling grace,
come plant your feet in this Eden,
come rest in this sacred space

¹⁹ “Untitled Poem.” April 2022. Retrieved from johnroedel.com.

oh weary traveler, oh somber fire,
oh shaking heart that is prone to fear,
come lay in My ribboned water
come to fully know that I'm right here

oh wilting daisy, oh dying star
oh broken song that needs a name,
come sit with Me among the wild,
and then you'll never be the same"

God and I take turns
saying all we need to say
to each other

I speak in short heavy jagged breaths
and the Divine replies in thin long pauses

this goes on until the sun begins to set ~

that's when it's time to leave
and even though I go home
I'm always still there

in the antiquated church
of trees and valleys
where foxes are lectors
where horizons are steeples
where clouds are vestibules
where campfires are incense
where time is a gospel
where the great flow is a sacrament
where forests are community

where a little piece of me always still remains
talking to the voice of whispering Love
as I watch trout be slain in the spirit

and I can't stop marveling at the altar of creation ~