

Gardens of joy and of rest

Gardens are an inseparable part of the design of every Mashriqu'l-Adhkar. 'Abdu'l-Baha specified that a series of nine gardens, each with a pool and fountain, was to encircle the Temple in Wilmette, Illinois. Years later, Shoghi Effendi said construction was incomplete until the gardens were developed. Time has demonstrated that wisdom.

The gardens provide a transition from the outside world, a meditative space amid natural beauty, a fitting adornment for the Dawning-Place of the Praise of God. But when the first two renovated gardens at the Baha'i House of Worship were officially opened April 21 at a celebration of the First Day of Ridvan, what did visitors appreciate most? Very simple. A place to sit.

"The flowers and foliage have always been beautiful," said Jim Polley, a longtime Baha'i from Antioch, Illinois, "but I like the fact that there are benches now." Gently curved concrete benchwalls now bracket each garden space -- a new feature introduced as part of Kingdom Project-funded Temple restoration, which was begun in summer 2000 with leveling of six sections of gardens and terrace decks.

Before renovation the lawn sloped up toward the outer edges of each garden, but the only place visitors could sit in prayer or meditation was grass. Richard Hill of Evanston echoed his appreciation of the new seating. "It will encourage people to linger," he said. Added Sandra Egerer of Des Plaines on a practical note: "It's just exactly what aging Baby Boomers need." Though the benchwalls are a novelty to those who have visited the Temple over the past few decades, landscape architect Carol Yetken said they are actually an element of the original garden designs the Guardian approved.

Hilbert Dahl's garden plan was only partially fulfilled in the early 1950s because of limited money. Recent years' research into those plans showed that it called for garden walls at a low height -- perfect for seating, said Yetken, who has been involved in Temple garden restoration plans for about 10 years. "It's such a simple thing to have added," she said, "but it's a very dramatic change." In fact, a return to Dahl's visual design combined with modern technology has been a central focus of the garden restorations from the start, Yetken pointed out in her presentation at the Holy Day program:

Floral plantings in each garden have been made more simple, in Dahl's words "used with caution to avoid the theatrical." Each garden has its own theme and plant selection. Overgrown hedges in the middle of the gardens have been removed to restore an uncluttered visual effect. Use of evergreens has been made consistent to provide a "layering effect," creating gentle boundaries between gardens and the grassy avenues that run between them. She added that the curves predominant in the design add a number of complications to the plan, but "the gracefulness with which Hilbert Dahl resolved all these issues was just spectacular." For their part, visitors long familiar with the Temple voiced their approval of the restoration's results. "I think it's lovely. ... Altogether I think it's money well-spent," said Elahe Lalehzari of Hawthorn Woods, whose wedding took place in the gardens in 1983. But she was worried about one thing: "I do miss the roses. I hope they

bring them back." Don't worry. Yetken said gardens to be reopened in the future contain roses of several varieties that have lived near the Temple for decades. They are placed where they will best thrive, given the interaction of sunshine patterns, lake breezes and other elements of the Chicago climate. It's all part of the plan.