



Biblical plants (modern versions), l to r, rue and two from Jean's garden, Citrus medica (etrog) and Ceratonia siliqua (carob) .

BIBLE GARDENS (PLANTS OF THE BIBLE)

by Jean Fefer

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It is exceptional a country the size of Israel, which comprises most the “Land of the Bible,” supported over 2,600 plant species. The country is 1/2 desert.

The Bible mentions about 110 plants by name or description. Since the Old Testament was written originally in Hebrew and Aramaic, after 1,000 years of oral transmission, it is a challenge to figure out which plant one is actually talking about in a particular passage.



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With so many translations, discrepancies depend on translators' horticultural knowledge or lack thereof. Modern botanical knowledge give a more accurate biblical plant identification. General climactic conditions have scarcely changed in the last millennia, leading to some confidence in plant identification. Even so, a fair number of plants may never be specifically identified.

Ancient Israelites' life revolved around agriculture. One would not find root vegetables (turnips or beets) used in the Bible text. They do not lend themselves to parables.

Wild edible herbs are found Bible text, such as the mustard seed parable (Matthew 17:20). Important fruit and nut tree gardens included date palm, olive, fig, walnut and almond. Many religious laws centered on agriculture!

Any Bible garden site has to take into account climate similarities and differences compared to the Holy Land. Possible specific focuses:

- **Herbs/condiments and uses now and then:** Eg., flax is used now a health supplement. In biblical times it was grown for linen clothing.
- **Flowers?** Lily and rose are the only two flowers named in the Bible. But lily, a generic name, applies to other flowers of the region, most grown from bulbs.
- **Important trees** that anyone familiar with the Torah or the Bible immediately recognizes as important then and now?

My own choice is to study more unusual plants found in the text. I do not have a Bible Garden as such but I do grow:



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- **Etrog tree (Citrus Medica)** (Leviticus 23:40). This primitive lemon, still grown in Israel today, is used as a ritual item for the Judaic High Holy Days. It produced fruit in 4 years from seed of a fruit produced in Israel about 15 years ago.
- **A small Carob tree** that appears in the prodigal son parable (Luke 15:16). I'm waiting for it to produce some pods.
- **Rue** -- a pretty shrublike plant with yellow flowers, but I find the odor and taste a bit off-putting.
- **Olive trees** -- I donated my five trees to the Bible Garden at the Mt. Carmel Labyrinth and Garden in Freeman's Town.
- **My myrtle** froze but I will plant another since it is involve in Judaic ritual.

I recommend:

- "Plant of the Bible and How to Grow Them" by Allan A.Swenson.
- "Plants of the Bible" by Michael Zohary is a good source for biblical significance of plants.