



For some people, gardening is a hobby; for others it is an art form. But for people who have a home in Eretz Yisrael, gardening is also a unique opportunity to make mitzvos grow.

by Libi Astaire

Alyssum is a low-growing plant found in gardens all over the world. Usually used as filler, or as an easy way to mask a bare patch of ground, it's not the sort of eye-catching plant that makes people stop and stare. But according to Tirza T., formerly of Florida and Memphis and now a resident of Jerusalem, it was the lowly alyssum that brought her to a higher appreciation of gardening in Eretz Yisrael.

"In Memphis, I had a house with a big front yard and I used alyssum as filler in between stones. Here in Jerusalem, I have an apartment, and I planted it in some window boxes. For the first time, I noticed that alyssum has a scent. It smells like honey, and you can make a *brachah* over it. Ever since then, I try to choose plants that have a scent so that people who come to my garden will be able to make *brachos*. When you make a *brachah* over a fragrance, it's good for the *neshamah*."

Although gardeners everywhere would claim that hours spent in the garden is quality time for the soul, there's only one spot on earth where so many of those intangible pleasures can be turned into *mitzvos* every day — Eretz Yisrael. And perhaps nowhere is that extra spiritual dimension felt so strongly as inside a Jerusalem garden.

Mishpacha

38 Mishpacha

6.8.05

15ivan.5765

A Cool Place To Do Mitzvos

A walk through the streets of Jerusalem during the weeks between Pesach and Shavuot is a delight for the color-loving soul. Purple and magenta-hued bougainvilleas tumble over the guard rails of high-flying balconies with acrobatic ease, rivaled only by the pink and red trails of falling geraniums that put on an equally dazzling show. Closer down to earth, the fruit trees also get into the act. Pomegranate trees make a contribution with their bursts of small, crimson colored flowers that dance upon the delicately swaying branches. And the graceful loquat tree, whose fruit has already ripened, adds abundant touches of apricot to the vibrant spring palette.

Yet gardens are as unique as their owners are, and Tirza's rooftop garden is a reflection of her unique *neshamah*. Leaving the pinks and magentas to others, her spacious balcony overlooking the dusty Judean hills is a lush expanse of green — the proverbial cool and refreshing oasis in the hot and parched desert.

"The garden has definitely evolved," she explains. "At first I had a lot of flowers, but it was too much. I wanted the garden to look cool in the summer, so now I have mostly green with a few cool colors, such as purple and blue. Even when we're inside, when we look out of the windows, the garden looks refreshing."

However, when she and her husband decided that they were ready to buy an apartment in Jerusalem, it wasn't just the opportunity to have a cool get-away that made her search for one with plenty of balcony space. Nor was it a feeling of longing for the large garden she had left behind in Memphis.

"I enjoyed my garden in America, but the point of the garden was really just to make the house look nice. In the same way that you keep the house painted and don't have broken windows, I kept up the garden to keep up the value of the property. But when I moved to Jerusalem, I wanted a garden for a completely different reason. Gardening in Eretz Yisrael is exciting because of all the *mitzvos* involved."

A long-time admirer of the Seven Species, Tirza's first purchases included a pomegranate and a fig tree, which gave her the opportunity to perform the *mitz-*

vah of *orlah* right away. And then came the *shemittah* year.

"The most exciting time is before *shemittah*," she comments. "Everyone is ready for it, and there are lots of *shuirim* because during the previous six years everyone has forgotten all the *halachos*. The *shemittah* year is hard, because



when you go into the garden, you can't touch anything. I have to stand with my hands clasped behind my back, like I was taught to do as a child. But every minute you spend in your garden without doing anything to it, you're doing a *mitzvah*! I know of people who normally don't have a garden, but will buy a plant before *shemittah* begins just so they can be a part of it."

According to Tirza, she doesn't feel that she has lost anything by trading in her American yard for an Israeli balcony. On the contrary, she says that she has gained from the experience. "Once you reach a certain age, you don't mind not having to do all the digging. And when your plants are in a tall pot, you can just pull a chair up next to them and prune away. You also see the plants better this way. They are not just masses and masses of background. You see the beauty of each one. Every leaf is something special."

A Beautiful Place to Enhance

In Jerusalem, not only is every leaf special, but so is every view. Every neighborhood has its own unique charm and history, and a well-planned garden can enhance both. Some people have the eye and the green thumb to make the most of their *daled amos* of garden space. But for those who don't, there are professionals such as Reuven Applebaum, founder and owner of Artistic Gardens, who has been

designing gardens throughout Eretz Yisrael for more than a decade.

A Harvard graduate who has worked in the great botanical gardens in Boston and New York City, Applebaum originally came to Jerusalem to learn at Ohr Somayach. However, it wasn't long before acquaintances began asking him to fix up their gardens, and since then he has become known for his artistic landscape designs that can transform even the most concrete-bound balcony into a secluded green paradise.

Applebaum is a master at camouflaging the unwanted sights that come with urban living, whether they are bus stops or symbols from other religions. Yet his love for his work is fueled by another side of his talents — finding creative ways to show off the "nine measures of beauty" of the Holy City to their best advantage. Nowhere is his skill more apparent than the work he has done for clients living in David's Village, which has spectacular views of the Old City walls.

"I like to find ways to lead the eye so that it 'discovers' the view," comments Applebaum. "I use the metaphor of being on a galloping horse. You take a turn around the bend and the breathtaking panorama suddenly comes into view."

Although Applebaum takes great pleasure in designing and maintaining gardens for his private clients, he has another dream that some day he would like to fulfill: to enhance the eternal beauty of Jerusalem by landscaping more of its public spaces.

For various reasons, many of the city's green spaces are no longer being properly maintained and some municipal projects are still uncompleted. One project that Applebaum would especially like to find private funding for is landscaping the public area that goes past David's Village and leads up to Jaffa Gate. Since practically all tourists to Jerusalem pass by this area on their way to the Old City, he feels that it should have a world-class landscape design that befits its stature. On a smaller scale, he would like to create a series of "points of nature" for Jerusalem's citizens because, as he explains, "people need quiet places to sit and meditate."

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Mishpacha 41

6.8.05

15ivan.5765

40 Mishpacha



"They say you can learn from everything, so I think about things that have happened in my garden"

A Quiet Place to Think

Taking a few minutes every day to sit and meditate in a quiet space is a spiritual practice that has been recommended by both prominent chassidic rebbes and leaders of the *musassar* movement. When Tirza came across the idea in a book she was reading about Rav Elyahu E. Dessler, zt"l, she thought it was a great idea — and she had no trouble finding a subject to think about. "They say you can learn from everything, so I think about things that have happened in my garden."

One particularly fruitful think session occurred not too long ago, after she had created a small artificial pond on her balcony (in a large washing bucket) and bought some water lilies to put in it. An unexpected bonus was the group of tadpoles that had sneaked into the pond along with the water lilies.

"My daughter is in *shidduchim* and so naturally I have been thinking about how we are going to find the money to pay for



all the wedding expenses. Now I had something else to worry about — how to feed the tadpoles. I came across a book that said I should feed them dog food. But they don't sell dog food at my neighborhood food store — and even if they did, I wouldn't want to *treif* up my can opener.

"If this had happened to me in America," Tirza continues, "I probably would have just run to the supermarket, picked up the dog food and a spare can opener, and that would have been the end of my

tadpole story. But since I am living here, I had to think of another solution. As I was thinking, the answer suddenly came to me: the *Ribono Shel Olam* takes care of tadpoles. Hashem has been preparing food for them to eat long before there was dog food or can openers. And just as the *Ribono Shel Olam* takes care of tadpoles, He will take care of my daughter when the time comes."

As a place for increasing *mitzvos* and developing *emunah*, a Jerusalem garden clearly can't be surpassed. But what's the secret to keeping the plants flourishing? Both Tirza T. and Reuven Applebaum give the same answer: watering and *davening*.

"You have to put in a good irrigation system," says Applebaum, "because there is no rainfall for five or six months out of the year. Then you have to *daven*."

Tirza agrees, adding that after you've done your *hishtadlus*, "It's all in the hands of the *Ribono Shel Olam*. Even plants need *siyata d'Shmaya*." ■

Mishpacha

6.8.05

42 Mishpacha