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Exhibition paper

# Plant Pillars

## How to document the aesthetic expression of plants?

### **ABSTRACT**

*To maintain the integrity of a garden design, a careful examination of the constituent plant materials is imperative. Unlike solid construction materials, gardeners rely on adaptable plant materials as the foundational components of their designs. These materials exhibit seasonal variations, which renders them complex to define. The essence of a garden's character is experienced through its aesthetic manifestations. However, without comprehensive documentation of the form, structure or colour scheme, it is difficult to comprehend the garden as a whole. The core of a design resides within the gardener's careful curation and arrangement of plant materials to convey a particular aesthetic. In my research, I formulated a method for a craftsman (or craftswoman), enabling them to quantify intangible plant materials, subtle or distinctive impacts of colour and form and their aesthetic values and functionalities utilising a systematic plant catalogue. Thus, the following question arises: How can we grasp the attributes of a good and sustainable design if we do not establish methods to systematically record and evaluate the aesthetics and the craftsmanship behind it?*

### **Keywords:**

plant materials, aesthetic values, research methods, plant catalogue, garden design.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2014, I was working on my master's thesis at the Department of Conservation at Gothenburg University—with the UNESCO World Heritage, *The Persian Garden*, as its focal point. While circumstances prevented the completion of my thesis, I now seize this opportunity through this extended abstract, along with a demonstration, to present the foundation of the method I devised and employed for my research, as well as how it came to be.

My trajectory as a gardener has always been inclined towards studying the intricacies of garden arts, exploring the conceptual essence of gardens and deciphering the elements that make a garden experientially enjoyable. In my bachelor's thesis titled '*CTH Sørensen – att närma sig en mästare*', I

analysed the designs of the Danish garden architect Carl Theodor Sørensen and endeavoured to develop new experimental methods to systemise certain facets of his design, all from my dual perspective as a gardener and a garden architect. Importantly, the gardener’s perspective forms the core of the work presented in this abstract.

In the contemporary era, the Persian Garden has revealed its prominence not only in its unbroken continuity of its structural and formal aspects spanning to 3000 years (Hobhouse, 2004) but also in its symbolic and meaning-infused disposition (Manzoor, 1993).

Of particular note is the enduring presence of the *Chahar Bagh*, the fourfold quarter-divided garden layout, within the Persian Garden (Hobhouse et al., 2006 [2003]; Khansari et al., 2004; Manzoor, 1993; Petersen, 1991; Sørensen, 1959). While structure and form undoubtedly form the fundamental aspects of a garden’s aesthetics (Sørensen, 1963; Turner, 2005), a question arises: What sustains the design beyond these foundational aspects? As a gardener and a plant enthusiast myself, I wanted to explore the very constituents that form these structures, namely the plant materials themselves and, in particular, their aesthetic expressions. This led to the ensuing question: How does one conduct such an exploration?

## THE METHOD

### A Plant Catalogue

To establish a strong groundwork upon arrival in Iran, I conducted a feasibility study to ensure a well-structured and thoroughly tested methodology for my research.

John Brookes (1987), in his work *Gardens of Paradise*, suggested that plants play an insignificant role concerning the structural elements of the Persian Garden. This notion piqued my curiosity and prompted me to explore further into its accuracy, as my personal experience suggested otherwise (Figures 1–3). Based on the speculation that whether the plant materials and their methodical utilisation could be documented in a systemised manner, I postulated that both gardening practitioners and even the general community could achieve a deeper understanding of the subtle inspirational narratives within gardens. Such an approach would facilitate a holistic grasp of a garden’s inherent design, thereby enabling a comprehensive evaluation of the factors contributing to its functionality and sustainability.



**FIGURE 1, 2 AND 3.** Bagh-e Shazadeh and Pansy Spring Borders (March 2015) (figure 1). Bagh-e Shazadeh and silvery poplars lit by the spring desert sun and a blue sky backdrop (March 2015) (figure 2). Bagh-e Fin and the main canal in bird’s eye view (April 2015) (figure 3).

Owing to its common depiction in miniatures, mosaics, carpets and poetry, it is evident that the plants in the Persian Garden have served as a source of great inspiration for Persian arts and culture (Figures 4–6). However, for my study, I wanted to obtain lists of scientific names and their varieties, along with measuring drawings of borders and colour schemes. These data contributes significantly to a craftsman’s understanding of a garden, while attempting to ‘read’ a garden remotely, out of time or place. Since these were rare finds, I understood this kind of information would be essential to track in my plant catalogue.



**FIGURE 4, 5 AND 6.** Mosaic of a Cypress, Iran 2015 (figure 4). A tapestry displaying the chahar bagh structure (photo: H. Behbahani)( figure 5). A floral-inspired mosaic, Iran 2015 (figure 6).

The feasibility study was conducted at Gunnebo Castle and Gardens in Gothenburg, wherein a plant catalogue termed ‘*Bagh-e Fin & Bagh-e Shazhadeh - a gardener’s study of form, colour and gardening*’ was developed. This catalogue was designed to scrutinise plant materials through the dual lenses of garden craftsmanship and design, ultimately striving to support the broadening of the research methods available for advancement within this field.

This study mainly focused on bedding plant borders, as plant borders are a ‘grey area’ and literature regarding this topic is scarce. In the preparatory and complimentary courses for my thesis, I studied the history of the Persian Garden and spent time in the archives of the Botanical Garden of Gothenburg to curate an inventory of plants featured in the Persian Garden.

Furthermore, through introspective contemplation and dialogues with my advisors and colleagues, we explored what aspects of the plant materials needed to be studied to understand their use. Studies would need to be conducted, on both a detailed proximate level, as well as their place in the context of a garden. By dividing these aspects into various categories, the idea of a plant catalogue was developed, comprising the following aspects:

*Species* – What plant am I investigating? (Figure 7) (Manzoor, 2014; RHS, 1999)

*Application* – How is it applied? What are its functions and characteristics? (Hobhouse, 1991)

*Habitat* – Where does it grow? (Hansen & Stahl, 1993)

*Colour* – What colours does the plant exhibit? (Edwards, 2004; Itten, 1988; Nilsson, 2013)

*Form* – What are the visual characteristics of the flowers and foliage and their growth habits? What types of horticultural manipulation, if any, exist? (RHS, 1999)

Plant schemes and context – How and where is the plant planted? (Figures 8–9) (Dunnet & Hitchmough, 2004; Jekyll, 1995)

*I. Species/Cultivar*

*Dahlia 'White Aster'*

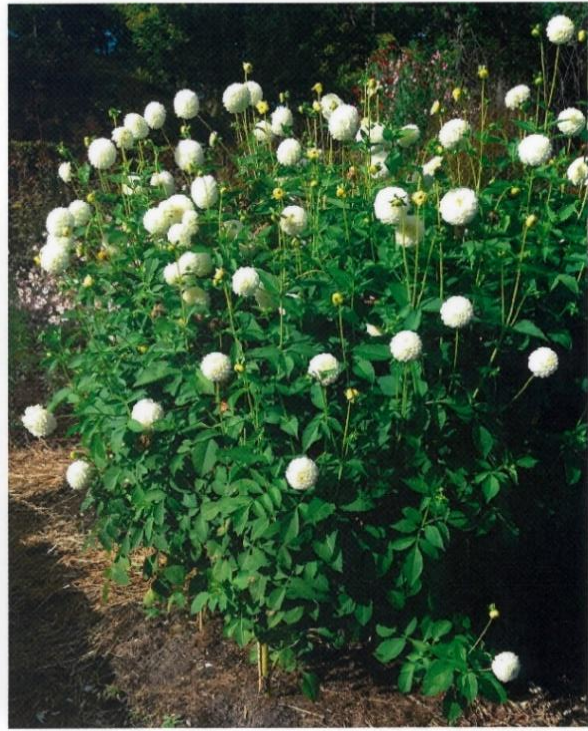
*Asteraceae*

Eng: *Dahlia*, Swe: *Dahlia*, Fars:

*Botanic classification: tuber*

*Flowering season: summer/autumn*

*Scent: insignificant*

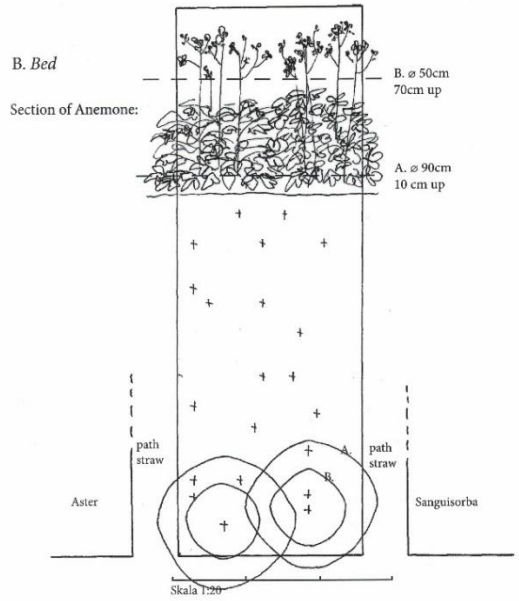
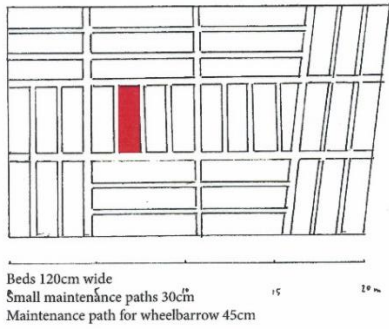


**FIGURE 7.** Excerpt from the category *Species* (Gunnebo, 2015), displaying the Dahlia 'White Aster' flower in a close-up view and the plant as a whole. Specifies botanical and trivial names and cultivars, botanic classification, flowering season and scent.

VI. Plant schemes and context

A. Context

The Anemone is to be found in one of the division of four quarters of the Herbal Garden at Gunnebo. The whole herbal garden is displayed in *block planting schemes*.

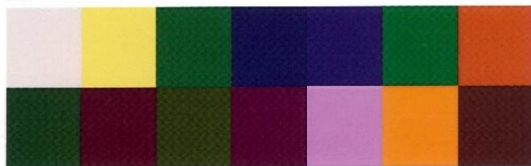


**FIGURE 8.** Excerpt from the category *Plant Schemes and Context* (Gunnebo, 2015). It specifies the bed where the plant grows and its immediate surrounding context in plan and elevation. A simple sketch and plan of the bed height, width and placement of the plants in the bed.

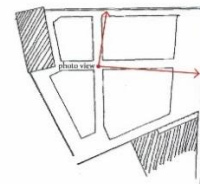
VI. Plant schemes and context

C. Colour context

C.I.

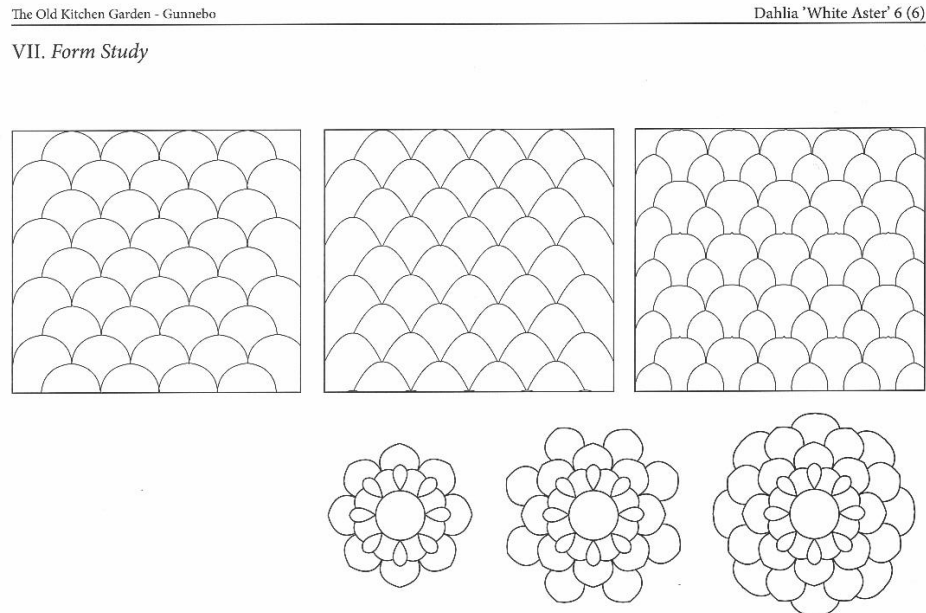


C.II.

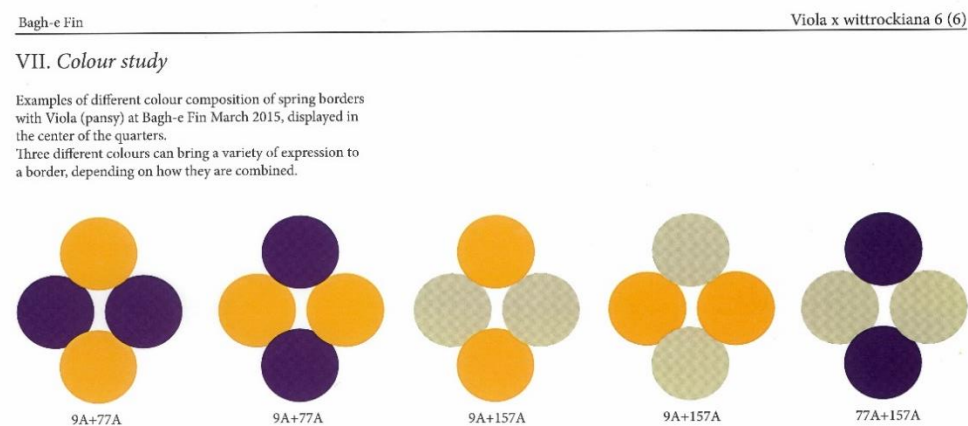


**FIGURE 9.** Excerpt from the category *Plant Schemes and Context*, presenting the colour scheme of where the plant grows. Each square represents the general colours present in the specific place and context being studied (Gunnebo, 2015).

*Form and colour study* – An open experimental category exploring questions such as how plants inspire other art mediums or what happens to a composition if colours are combined in different manners and masses? (Figures 10–11) (Jones, 1982; Rusten Åmot & Ophus, 2014)



**FIGURE 10.** Excerpt from the category *Form and Colour Study* (Gunnebo, 2015). Experimenting with different patterns and shapes inspired by the shape of the Dahlia flowerhead.



**FIGURE 11.** Excerpt from the category *Form and Colour Study* (Iran, 2015). Combining different colours of pansies found at a border at Bagh-e Fin and exploring different combinations of these colours to examine their impact on the display and design at large.

## REFLECTIONS

In Iran, the plant catalogue methodology I devised at Gunnebo was utilised in my field studies of select gardens: Bagh-e Fin in Kashan and Bagh-e Shazadeh in Mahan. Having a distinct methodology and a clear idea of what data to collect was a vital tool in conducting my studies. I was able to collect almost all the data for the plant catalogue. However, a crucial element was lacking, one which I had access to at Gunnebo and not in Iran, which was the perspective of the gardeners ‘on set’. When the categories in the catalogue are studied, inquiries about maintenance and built structures will arise and the interactions between them can be discovered. These questions are crucial to the study of both historic and contemporary gardens to form an understanding of sustainable design creations and their maintenance and conservation (Florence Charter, 1981).

At Gunnebo, I conducted interviews with the head gardener and communicated with passing gardeners to gather information about maintenance, plant usage and their idea of what ‘their’ garden was expressing.



**FIGURE 12 AND 13.** Gardener at work, Naranjestan Garden, Shiraz (May 2015) (figure 12). Courtyard Garden Kashan (April 2015) figure 13.)

Therefore, limitations exist in my study of the Persian Garden. Some questions were left unanswered. Questions about what kind of maintenance is performed and why it is performed can only be left to qualified assumptions (Figures 12–13). A trained gardener who is well versed with the garden craft can make some assumptions; however, the silent knowledge of the local gardening culture was likely lost because of my inability to communicate in Farsi.

We can read a lot from documenting and understanding the plants that form the building materials, but it is also essential to have a dialogue with the gardeners. Gardeners shape and design the garden, with or without their immediate awareness. If we can develop more accessible methods of documentation, then we can ensure that such valuable information is not lost. Moreover, it would aid in revealing sustainable designs.

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