

NEZAHAT BOTANICAL GARDEN, ISTANBUL



The Catalan Parliament was beautifully lit from every side. Ancient cobblestone streets at the entrance glistened after a brief April shower. Inside the grand hall a festive social gathering of garden professionals from around the world was in progress. Multiple languages could be heard all at once, Arabic, Russian, English, Spanish, Korean, French and more. A delegation from Turkey came with an English interpreter; I joined a conversation about a new garden being built on the Asian side of Istanbul. Someone mentioned it would be developed in the cloverleaf of a major highway. I must have looked incredulous. An elderly man handed me his card as he gently held my arm. In broken English he told me “plan a visit someday, it will be very beautiful”. The seed was planted, that was 2004.



Nearly a decade later I stepped off a listing ferry onto the furthest western fringe of Asia in Kadikoy Turkey, a bustling suburb across the Bosphorus from downtown Istanbul. I pulled a crumpled map out my pocket and hailed a cab. The language barrier was complete, but as soon as the driver saw the map we were off on the eight mile drive. The expansion of Istanbul into Asia is stunning. As far as the eye could see, high rise buildings filled the skyline with highways weaving a cacophonous pathway of nearly endless traffic. As I marveled at a particularly opulent high rise, we made a sudden turn and stopped. Emerging from the cab, with the

driver’s cigarette smoke in tow, an intimate landscape beckoned. What was once an urban wasteland is now a flourishing botanical garden.

As one enters the garden traffic noise abates somewhat. Vast collections of Mediterranean flora expand through a shallow bowl, neatly landscaped for public access. The seminal tree of the region *Olea europea*, the culinary olive, displays its coveted status as a horticultural and cultural icon of the entire region. No other plant has a more important agricultural role than this long lived species. Now days much of the Turkish olive crop heads to China where the ancient flavor has gained a vast following. Nearby another member of the Olive family grows in a linear mulched bed, the American Ash, one of Virginia's most common forest trees. I always love seeing a Virginia native plant exhibited in foreign gardens.

Walking up a steep hill one comes to a high point in the garden. A vast view spreads west toward old Istanbul, where the Golden Horn enters the Bosphorus. This exposed knoll is surely one of the botanical highlights of Nezahat. Several rectangular, gravelly raised beds rise to waist height. Randomly displayed are the true treasures of Turkey's exceptional native flora; bulbs. Many, perhaps most, of the world bulbs come from West Asia's undulating, porous limestone landscape, a place where geology and climate coalesce to harbor one of the world's most diverse selections of bulbs. Since biblical times royalty, traders and early naturalist sought to collect and



grow these gems. They can be stunningly intricate, colorful and bold. In addition, the bulbs travel well and are easy to collect. Overtime the number of wild bulbs declined due to over-collection. This remains a problem today for Turkey's natural resource managers. The majority of bulbs grown in Holland are derived from Turkish species.

Since its inception, Nezahat focused as much on conservation as beauty. Among the delicate bulbs on display, *Fritularia*'s, *Tulips* and *Romulea* yield dainty flowers compared to hybridized plants that we encounter at commercial nurseries. Generally, these plants prefer sharp drainage where water passes rapidly and never stays too long. The soothing Mediterranean sun and cool nights play an equally important ecological role fostering the bulb life cycles. The raised beds are carefully built to mimic their natural habitat. Conservation of rare plants in botanical garden collections plays an increasingly important role in reintroducing endangered species back into the wild. Nezahat is well suited to such a role, and the need in Turkey is great.

Descending the high knoll one passes by the rock garden exhibiting numerous alpine plants native to eastern Turkey, including the dormant stratovolcano, Mt. Ararat. A fine collection of European alpines are also found here, many from the Carpathian Alps in neighboring Romania. Near the rock garden is a meticulously maintained propagation and holding area for plants being prepared for exhibit. Once at the base of the hill a curious question comes to mind; how does one get to the next "lobe" of the garden in the highway cloverleaf? Like many aspects of Nezahat this has been given special attention. Between each lobe a sophisticated pedestrian tunnel crosses beneath the highway. Discreetly engineered for foot travel, electrical needs and water drainage, the tunnel is also an exhibit space. Upon stepping into the tunnel lights turn on illuminating marvelous collections of education exhibits ranging from flower anatomy to herbal medicines. A special section depicts Ethnobotany, the use of plants by humans. Here ancient paintings document the gift of pomegranates for the Sultan Mehmet to celebrate the circumcision of a son.



Emerging from the tunnel you find an entirely different space in the garden. The western most lobe sports a colorful children's garden, picnic area and shady conifers providing respite from the sun. Nearby a water garden with many species of aquatic lilies and giant Koi fish mingle together. People of all ages are mesmerized by the colorful combination of animals and plants.

Returning to the parking lot adjacent to the roaring highway, I'm struck that an urban wasteland could be so usefully converted into a public space devoted to the understanding and appreciation of

plants. On the way out I pass the busts of the founder and his wife, to whom the garden is dedicated. On closer inspection I realize the founder was the elderly man who invited me to visit ten years earlier in Barcelona. He said it would be beautiful. It certainly is, and remarkably innovative too.

From the BGT Team-more info at ngbb.org.tr