

# THE GARDENS AT CREEK PARK DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES



Summer in Dubai is the slow season, most Emiratis head to Europe, leaving the hottest days on the Arabian Peninsula behind. It seems to make a lot of sense when the temperature is 110 and the heat index reaches 120 or more. The temperatures are truly repressive for the uninitiated, and it's surprisingly humid. But life goes on in the United Arab Emirates. For one thing, everyone who makes the place hum is there working. Skilled laborers, technocrats, nurses, cab drivers, and myriad workers keep gleaming hotels, the world's largest mall, and the world's tallest building running. Among the globe's most diverse workforce, Filipinos, Ethiopians, Somalis, Afghans, Indians, Pakistanis, and Sri Lankans keep the city afloat. For the most part, Emiratis are only present in the most officious occupations. There are a few public gardens in Dubai and those at Creek Park are the least known.

Like most aspects of Dubai, Creek Park is clean, efficient, and well planned. In America, it would be considered a “super park”. There’s a Dolphinarium, a Sky Tram, several eateries, a beautifully landscaped waterfront, and the requisite Prayer Rooms in a few strategic locations. We are after all, in a devoutly Muslim country that’s rightly proud of its open space, alongside some of the world’s most remarkable skyscrapers, akin to Singapore in its impressive social order and first-world amenities. Only sixty years ago, Dubai was a fishing and pearling village of perhaps 4000 inhabitants living quietly under British rule. All that changed once oil was discovered and the race to the present was on.

In the far northeastern end of Creek Park is a lovely collection of dryland plants that provide a peaceful break from the often-crowded waterfront and teeming local traffic located in the oldest part of the city not far from the Dubai Museum. Here Dubai Creek is a bustling waterway, much more an estuary river than a creek. Yachts, traditional Dhows, and tippy water taxis ply the calm water. Large Dhows set sail for Iran, overloaded with goods. In the distance, jets rumble out of Dubai International Airport, among the world’s busiest, just a few miles away.



Gardens within park systems are often misunderstood and overlooked. Not the titans of research, university affiliation, or huge endowments, yet they are every bit as important in the conservation of open space and public enrichment. The Gardens at Creek Park are administered by the Dubai Department of Parks and Horticulture and while staff work in other parts of the city, this is their showpiece.



In Dubai, one is ever cognizant of the next patch of shade. The sun is unrelenting; all the plants on display have to be adapted to these conditions. American Cacti and African Euphorbias cover a good section of the garden's core. Madagascan Rose and Yuccas mingle in gravel beds, combining lance-like foliage, tubular pink flowers, and the swollen stems. The small-leaved jade plant is a prolific ground cover and Bougainvillea bloom reliably. This is a pleasure garden with very little signage and limited interpretation. Everything is irrigated by the city's desalinization plant drawing from the Persian Gulf. Local birds, including the colorful Hoopoe, occasional parrots, and the ubiquitous Indian House Crow, gather at dripping irrigation heads. Nearby a feral cat hides under the shade of an oleander hedge.

Trees are a focal point and none-more than the ever-present date palm. Among ethnobotanists, this tree may well be the backbone of Arab civilization. Its radial crown with large draping fronds offers shade, thatch for roofing, and an exquisite fruit that keeps almost indefinitely. Date cultivation from Oman to the Atlantic shores of Morocco is a robust and ancient agricultural system across the world's greatest desert. Throughout the gardens, large fig trees with expansive crowns offer the best shade. These Southeast Asian transplants are widespread in warmer climates and require significant irrigation at Creek Park. They have no food value but are revered for their ornamental features and seem to tolerate the incredible heat. These figs trees are also wholly sacred in Buddhism.

There's also a new world component to the gardens, some of North America's best-known dryland trees are grown at Creek Park. Any Virginia native plant enthusiast knows the hackberry tree. Denizens of deep hollows and moist river bank forest. The corky bark is unique among Virginia trees. It's a bit surprising to come across a hackberry growing comfortably at Creek Park. But this is the netleaf hackberry, a Native American tree in the Western states. It's common in dryland settings, often preferring limestone infused soils. The single specimen at Creek Park looked perfectly happy in an irrigated bed.

Another western desert species found there is the creosote bush. This is a true desert dweller, found from Texas to California. A plant with several medicinal qualities and the ability to grow in the harshest conditions, the creosote bush is right at home in the UAE. Medicinal uses include cures for influenza, colds, upset stomach, arthritis, anemia, and fungal infections. The creosote bush is a competitive survivor in the desert. The presence of toxic compounds in the roots prevents other plants from growing nearby. Another particular curiosity is the buttonwood, a widespread mangrove species normally associated with salt marshes and coastal sub-tropical forests. In the United States, this tree is restricted to Florida and South Texas. It's an important tree in Everglades National Park. Buttonwood is used in several Gulf States as a landscape



plant tolerant of salty conditions. It's now one of the most widespread species in Kuwait, another example of humans mixing the world's plants to suit a particular climate.

Creek Park has many amenities for the casual visitor in Dubai and is a crown jewel for the growing park system. The inclusion of a lovely landscape garden adds to those amenities and fills an important role in bringing horticultural quality to the rapidly expanding city. We don't often think of gardens in the Arabian Desert, but a well-planned public park can yield many secrets and Creek Park is such a place.

From the BTG Team

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