

Jerusalem Botanical Gardens and its gardens partnership with Hever Castle, Kent

The Jerusalem Botanical Gardens was founded in by Michael Avishai , and is run with Israeli volunteers and visiting volunteers from all over the world. The UK Friends of the Jerusalem Botanical Gardens was started in the same year, and a horticultural relationship has been in place with Hever Castle for the last twenty-five years.

This is a piece by **Neil Miller**, Head Gardener at Hever then an article by **Gavin McEwan** reproduced with permission from Horticulture Week (Hortweek 13 August 2010) with additional pictures.

❖ [See also: Jerusalem Botanical Gardens, and Friends](#)



Neil (left) and his friend from Newcastle, Dan Fox (right) in Jerusalem



Neil Miller writes:

A few years ago I saw an advert in the professional Gardeners Guild Magazine for working holidays in the Jerusalem Botanical Gardens in Israel. As I love to visit places, not necessarily classified as 'the norm' and places off the beaten track - Israel isn't normally the top of everyone's tourist destinations - I thought it was too good an opportunity to miss given my passion for gardening.

After long discussions with my Chief Executive at Hever Castle, who rightly wanted to be assured that there would be no repercussions taking into account Israel's volatility if I participated The gates of Hever castle are obviously open to all nationalities and religious denominations. and they didn't want it to seem as if siding with anyone in particular or showing a prejudice which could be noticed by Jewish and Arab visitors. In the end an agreement was made for me to go.

On my first trip to the Jerusalem Botanic Gardens, I fell in love with Israel, everything from the culture, people, scenery and food - the whole diversity of the country is second to none in my opinion.

As for the gardens; what can I say? So under-rated! the garden covers over 45 acres with over 10,000 species of plants and flowers and is laid out geographically, in regions, so that you can literally walk around the world. If this garden were situated in the West, it would certainly be at the top of 'must see' gardens.

I am so lucky that the owners of Hever Castle are continuing to sponsor me and I go on my fourth working holiday this November. The knowledge I have gained on irrigation and arid planting is a huge benefit to Hever, and the knowledge I take to the Botanical Gardens is, I know, beneficial to them. At the end of the day, everyone is a winner!

I urge anyone with a bit of curiosity about plants to take the plunge and participate in a working holiday - you won't be disappointed and I guarantee that your first visit will not be your last.

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Neil's photographs of Hever People and other volunteers in Jerusalem:



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Cultural cooperation - Kent and Jerusalem, Israel



Collaboration between two very different gardens is bringing rewards to both, Gavin McEwan reports

Hever Castle Gardens head gardener Neil Miller at work -image: Hever Castle.

For a quarter of a century, a partnership between British horticulture and the Jerusalem Botanical Gardens has kept the Israel attraction in contact with the wider plant world. But the benefits have not been all one-way, as gardeners at Kent's Hever Castle have found.

Hever head gardener Neil Miller has taken three working holidays there, having originally responded to an advertisement in *The Professional Gardener*. "For me it just meant combining horticulture with a holiday," he says. "But it has flourished since." This is due in part to backing from Hever's owner, Broadland Properties. He explains: "It supports us to go and garden out there, and in turn we learn about things like dry gardening and irrigation from them."

Until recently, the "very underrated" botanic garden was the only one in the Middle East. "Their collection is second to none - more people should see it," says Miller. "In a different part of the world, it would be bombarded." Dan Fox, a gardener at Hever, went on his first trip to Jerusalem this March, in the form of a two-week working holiday. "There was a degree of apprehension about the political situation there," he admits.

"You are certainly aware of it when you're there - it's quite in-your-face. On the other hand, you pick up on the raw energy of the place and come back fired up. You also learn more about people management, how to interact with authority and how to increase your own productivity."

He adds: "You are technically working, but it's not hugely pressurised. You have time to discuss things like pruning with your colleagues. We still interact, sending emails and photos back and forth." Miller agrees that the chance to talk with colleagues benefits both sides, saying: "In horticulture you can get isolated."

Miller and Fox recently helped to plant up a butterfly house, which is hoped will increase revenue at the site, while their experience of maintaining Hever's famous

yew maze has also helped them lend a hand in the preparation of a similar attraction in the Jerusalem garden, currently being planted up by local volunteers.

But the experience has also left the two keen to create an arid garden within Hever's grounds. "It's something they know all about. It hardly rains at all there from April to September," says Miller. Apparently bitten by the bug, Miller will return to lead nine-day working holidays to the Jerusalem gardens this November and again in March next year.

Hever Castle is only the latest of a number of horticultural and botanical bodies that have brought their expertise to the Israeli site. Such exchanges have been critical for its success since its creation in 1985.

This is largely down to Jose Dent, founder and chairman of the London-based Friends of Jerusalem Botanic Gardens (FJBG), who first met the garden's founder and former scientific director Michael Avishai in 1980. "He had a vision, but no money", says Dent, then chairman of the Hampstead Horticultural Society. "It was very ramshackle and run hand-to-mouth. I realised they needed extra help."

Money was first raised for a scholarship in the year of the garden's opening and since then more than 100 trained horticulturists have done shifts at the garden through the FJBG. "I was always keen on international cooperation at the garden - gardening is an international language," says Dent, who has overseen fundraising in the UK by various means including exclusive high-end garden tours.

Jerusalem Botanical Gardens

Situated below Israel's parliament, the Knesset, the 18ha Jerusalem Botanical Gardens packs in more than 10,000 taxa, six phytogeographical sections, a medicinal plant area, one of the world's largest bonsai collections, a butterfly house and a 500m-long path of plants mentioned in the Bible.

It also has a key role in preserving the area's biodiversity, says FJBG administrator Barbara Steinberg. "The Israeli government has other priorities. But more than 300 plant species in Israel are under threat from development." Indeed, the garden features species no longer found in the wild, some of which are proving a major headache to propagate, she adds.

The garden also aims to demonstrate best practice in water management, with plans to upgrade an existing sewage water recycling station using plants as part of the purification process, along with a new display garden focusing on drought-resistant plants.

Adult admission is 25 shekels (£4).

These have also funded the development of the garden, recently providing a six-seater mobility buggy for disabled visitors to the steeply inclined site, which has also been made wheelchair-accessible. Furthermore, it helps Israeli workers gain experience abroad - for example, funding a visit by current scientific director Dr Ori Fragman Sapir at Global Botanic Gardens Congress in Dublin in June.

"The people there feel quite isolated," says FJBG administrator Barbara Steinberg. "It's not somewhere you'd go en route to somewhere else. Any opportunity to have contact with other gardeners is welcome." Indifference from officialdom at home has not helped either. "It's only in the past two years that the garden has got any money from the Israeli government," she points out. Otherwise, it has been funded by five organisations, including the adjacent Hebrew University, which the garden formed part of until 1994.

Fox adds: "The city and national authorities don't promote it at all - they are missing an opportunity." According to Dent: "There are still people in Israel who don't know where it is." However the casual overseas visitor is unlikely to be lured in by the garden's own website, which is in Hebrew only. Steinberg adds: "Now botanic gardens are opening up in Abu Dhabi and Jordan, it's an opportunity to have a relationship with them."

Meanwhile in the UK, there is no shortage of interest from horticulturists keen to help out. "I am getting more enquiries, particularly from people having 'gap years' in middle-age," she says. "You have to be skilled, and fit enough for the work. But we have had workers ranging in ages from 13 to 79."

Kew's Diploma students are offered five-week scholarships at the garden, which "one or two" students take up every year, says Steinberg. "They usually have a passion for one area of the plant world, which can be accommodated," she adds.

Kew's head of orchids Chris Ryan has helped to develop the garden's orchid collection, for example, while student Scott King was able to apply his knowledge of epiphytes, she says. Among the current intake, RHS Wisley senior gardener Dave Davies, who worked on planting up the Bicentenary Glasshouse, is now redeveloping the tropical conservatory there as part of a one-year scholarship.

Other previous visiting scholars have included landscape designer and writer Dan Pearson - "he keeps in touch", says Dent - while former Kew director Sir Peter Crane is now president of the FJBG. Fox adds that there is a pastoral element to the work. "They have a lot of war veterans. The work helps them, but they need supervision - for example, to identify weeds."

Other long-standing volunteers include retired professors as well as young people from the city's different communities. "For the volunteers there, it's as much a social

occasion as work," says Fox. "We have wondered whether we have a right to impose our working regime on them."

The garden also has a role in bridging the divide between the country's communities, Steinberg adds. As well as hosting events such as concerts, weddings and Bar Mitzvahs, it runs horticultural training for adults. And now a "co-existence programme" brings Jewish and Arab school children together to work at the garden.

Last year, more than 300 school children were involved, but Steinberg admits: "It took several years before schools agreed to it. Now they grow flowers and vegetables, which they take home to mum and dad. Most of them grow up in apartments, with little or no open space." A "children's discovery garden" is planned for the site, but is "still some way away", she adds.

This has allayed some concerns of partner organisations in this country, she adds. "(Hever chief executive) Duncan Leslie wanted to be convinced that it was open to everyone - he had to explain to the board that it wouldn't upset communities here. But the staff is mixed - they must leave their prejudices at the door."

Hever Castle Gardens

Hever Castle may date back to the 15th century, but the nearly 20ha of formal gardens are "youngish", says head gardener Neil Miller. They were laid out in the 1900s under the direction of then owner William, First Viscount Astor, of the Anglo-American business and political dynasty.

These include an extensive Italian Garden, which houses Astor's collection of antique sculptures, along with a rose Garden holding more than 4,000 plants, a maze and a large artificial lake, all of which have been continually maintained. With around 250,000 visitors annually, it is on the RHS Recommended Gardens list .

Miller heads a team of nine garden staff. "We are pretty stretched to maintain it - we are used to working flat-out," he points out, adding that the garden, previously closed from November to March, now opens until Christmas to allow for festive events.

Adult admission is £10.50.

Go to www.hevercastle.co.uk





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