Ottoman gardens, quite naturally, are thought of first within the general framework of Islamic gardens. The Islamic world however extends over three continents, and, its culture is one that has grown up over the course of many centuries. When we look at the particular features of “Islamic gardens” it is not possible to discover one layout that fully covers them all, whose roots reach into quite different cultures and were created in different parts of the world with quite different climate and soil conditions.

In their westward migration to seek land that was more fruitful than the arid steppes of Central Asia, the Turks brought with them many ancient traditions, which they kept alive for very many centuries. They introduced them first to Iran, and, then when officially entered in - after the Battle of Malazgirt, in the east of Anatolia in 1071 to Anatolia, the mainland of Turkey of today. This was a part of the store of knowledge that they had acquired from the different regions through which they passed and from the different cultures with which they came into contact.

Incredibly successful in their ability to adapt to different climates and geographies, Turks created gardens which were intended to satisfy the pleasures and employed luxury as well as addressing a variety of needs. The influence of Persian quadripartite garden layout and culture of intersecting watercourses is to be found in gardens in those parts of Anatolia that were conquered and settled by Turkish groups that had arrived there by way of Iran. It is apparent in the Artuqid palace garden, which is designed around a mosaic-decorated pool and a water channel, in the Diyarbakır Citadel in the 13th Century; in the gardens of the Seljuks’ great Kubadabad Palace near Beyşehir in the middle of Anatolia, and in many other gardens like these elsewhere in Anatolia. Among the Ottomans however, this influence appears to have been limited to only a few instances, such as the Karabali and Sultaniye gardens in Istanbul.

Ottoman gardens on the other hand were directly influenced by the culture of Byzantines, which itself developed out of Roman gardens. This was a culture of gardens that featured pools and fountains but lack the severity of formal layouts. The Ottomans were adept at taking, from other cultures with which they came in contact, elements that seemed to suit their own traditions and reinterpreting them to create a brand-new synthesis. Their approach to gardens was that they should be a part of nature; in planting them with flowers and trees, their concern was only to enrich and embellish upon what nature had already provided.

When creating their own gardens, the Ottomans sought practical solutions that suited the topography, dimensions, climate, and in general, the ambient conditions of the place where the garden would

*This is the original version of “Introduction to the Catalogue of Ottoman Gardens,” published by Nurhan Atasoy in 2007 on www.middleeastgarden.com. Only minor edits have been made for internal consistency.
be rather than adhere to a particular set of fixed rules. Instead of building watercourses, they created gardens where running water already existed. Here they embellished upon what nature had already provided, planting trees and even putting in flowerbeds. Their additions and interventions however were not according to some rigid plan and they sought to preserve the look of a setting that might have developed naturally.

We know that they made the best of possible use of available land when determining where a garden should be and also that the location and construction of garden architecture, placing of terraces and embankments, and the layout of watercourses were never haphazard. References in garden-related sources to “garden-construction” and statements indicating that Sinan, the architect of the 16th century, landscaped at least some gardens during the reign of Süleyman II, provide additional confirmation of documents that architects oversaw the landscaping of Ottoman gardens in and around Istanbul. Although Ottoman gardens lacked a strict formal organization; that does not mean that they were disorganized.

In order to understand why Ottoman gardens did not conform to the plans and attitudes of Islamic or rather other cultures’ garden, one needs only to look at the examples of the palace and privy gardens that they created in different places and how they conform to their locations. Such examples abound: the garden of the old palace inside Bursa citadel in the first capital of Ottoman State with its abundant supply of water; the garden of Edirne Palace in the second capital of the Ottoman State, built on deliberately created ground located between two rivers; gardens of Topkapı Palace in Istanbul, the third and last capital of the Ottoman Empire, descending the slopes of a prominence surrounded by sea on three sides; Üsküdar Palace gardens with a view above the Marmara Sea; and privy gardens like those at the Küçüksu running from the seashore up the hills on either side of a pleasant creek on the Bosphorus; and, Kağıthane on the Golden Horn in Istanbul.

Some Ottoman miniatures depict Ottoman rulers in their different gardens present main elements of the gardens; fountains, garden kiosks and cypress trees, and, some the gardens with their flowerbeds and watercourses.

In the 16th century, Ottoman gardens filled with flowers which impressed the European visited Istanbul, which resulted the export of flowers and trees from Turkey to Europe, and, in the 17th century to a certain extent influenced the gardens of Europe. By the 19th century, especially in Istanbul, the practice of recruiting foreign gardeners from Europe and employing them in design of the gardens of the palace grounds had begun. Gardens were then being laid out entirely in European fashion; Ottoman landscaping practices changed and a new style emerged.

The information given in the catalogue is based mainly on the studies of archival documents, historical sources and visual materials; Ottoman miniature paintings and European engravings as well as Turkish and foreign sources and publications that cover most of the Ottoman imperial gardens in and out of Istanbul as well as the imperial gardens of the palaces from the early times to the late 19th century which is mainly based on to the studies of late Sedat Hakkı Eldem.

The critical discourse on Ottoman Turkish gardens developed in the late 1950s. The seminal work is Muzaffer Erdoğan’s article dated 1958 entitled ‘Osmanlı Devrinde Istanbul Bahçeleri’ [Gardens of Istanbul in the Ottoman period]. Gönül Aslanoğlu Evyap’s book dated 1972 entitled Eski Türk Bahçeleri ve Özellikle Eski İstanbul Bahçeleri [Old Turkish Gardens and Old Istanbul Gardens in Particular] was reprinted in English in 1999. This gives an extensive list of gardens, especially in Istanbul.

Sedad Hakkı Eldem’s studies on gardens entitled
Türk Bahçeleri [Turkish Gardens; Istanbul, 1973] focuses on the elements of garden architecture by drafting plans and sections of surviving or no longer existing Ottoman Turkish gardens and parks, especially in Istanbul along the Bosphorus.

Gülru Necipoğlu, in her detailed study of the Topkapı Palace also makes a detailed analysis of various gardens in the palace complex and gives evidence for imperial garden life in her book entitled Architecture, Ceremonial and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries, dated 1991. In her 1997 article titled ‘The Suburban Landscape of Sixteenth Century Istanbul as a Mirror of Classical Ottoman Garden Culture,’ Necipoğlu identifies a number of 16th century gardens along the Bosphorus in the manuscripts and texts by foreign travelers.

My recent work on Ottoman imperial gardens of the classical period entitled A Garden for the Sultan: Gardens and Flowers in the Ottoman Culture was published in 2002 in both Turkish and English; stressed the place of gardens within Ottoman culture, highlighting the rise of interest for flowers and its impact on all Ottoman art throughout the 16th to the 19th centuries. And the new edition of this book also includes gardens of the later periods; the 19th and the 20th century gardens: 15. Yüzyıldan 20. Yüzyıla Osmanlı Bahçeleri ve Hasbahçeler [Ottoman Gardens and Imperial Gardens in 15th–20th Centuries; Istanbul, 2005, available only in Turkish].

Although Ottoman gardens of the classical period were not formal in the sense of being laid out according to a predetermined schematic, the consistency and repetition in both the manmade and natural elements of Ottoman garden architecture show that there is certainly an Ottoman garden culture to be studied. My work on Ottoman palace gardens in both books combines Ottoman sources with foreign traveler’s chronicles, identifying the elements of Ottoman palace gardens. Ottoman miniature painting art should be regarded as a primary source in the study of Ottoman gardens.

Recent dissertations on Ottoman garden culture focus on different periods or employ various sources such as Ottoman poetry. Özlem Salman’s dissertation dated 1999 conducted at Istanbul Technical University focuses on late Ottoman gardens; Shirine Hamadeh’s dissertation also dated 1999, conducted at MIT, ‘The City’s Pleasures: Architectural Sensibility in Eighteenth Century Istanbul’ (1999) shed light on the relationship between gazel poetry and garden life in the eighteenth century Istanbul demonstrating how a modernization of Ottoman garden and city culture developed between the Tulip Period (1718–1730) and the beginning of Ottoman westernization in the nineteenth century. More recently B. Deniz Çalış’s dissertation dated 2004, ‘Ideal and real spaces of Ottoman Imagination: Continuity and Change in Ottoman Rituals of Poetry (Istanbul 1453–1730)’ conducted at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, and at Dumbarton Oaks, examines the concept of garden and space in şehrengiz poetry through the 16th to 18th centuries, studies imagined and real practices of garden rituals.

This catalogue aims to indicate the importance of gardens central to the Ottoman culture, displaying an extensive number of gardens recorded mainly in Istanbul, but not limited to. Scholars visiting this website are kindly invited to contribute to this catalogue.