

The Origins and Future of AUB's Green Campus



¹ American University of Beirut, 1902-03 Annual Report, p.27

² Charles I. Abou Char, "Thoughts on the Campus and its Trees." AUB Bulletin Vol. 34, 1991, p. 1.

The Past

When Daniel Bliss founded AUB in 1866, one of the first things he did was plant the trees that would define the campus's boundaries. "Not far from twenty pounds sterling ...were expended last spring in planting trees upon the property at Ras Beirut and building temporary walls for the purpose of defining boundaries...," wrote Bliss.

By 1903, administrators had woven campus greening into the University's broader mission statement. "We cannot afford to postpone the systematic and intelligent development of our magnificent campus in the direction of gardens, tree planting, botanical gardens..."¹

Though there was some vegetation on campus, like the large prickly-leaved oak near the Lee Observatory and several large carob trees, the area was mostly a sparse, rocky outcrop.

Transitioning to a green campus was difficult. The ground was harsh, "holes had to be chiseled out of solid rock for the trees to be planted," wrote one *Outlook* reporter in 1953. A leading figure in that transition was AUB Professor of

Chemistry W. A. West. West collected acorns and planted them in various parts of campus. He also introduced the Arizona cypress trees in 1923. "Anywhere you see a Judas tree or a Viburnum shrub you can be sure that it came from a seedling which I dug with my own hands in the mountains, and brought back to Beirut in my knapsack," said West.

West not only spread campus greenery, but curated it: "It is not generally known that I am responsible for cutting down about as many trees as I planted. Had this not been done, the sea would now be invisible from many parts of campus."

Campus's landmark trees arrived at different times by different means. In 1911, alumnus H. Glockler brought the large eucalyptus tree located north of Assembly Hall from Jerusalem in a biscuit tin. Former AUB Treasurer G. Stewart brought seeds from California and Australia in the early 1900s. And someone planted the large fig tree outside Medical Gate in 1931.

In the early 1930s, an abundance of water supplied from the campus well facilitated tree planting. This allowed the grounds committee to diversify. To the drought resistant evergreens, they added a collection of flowering, water-loving trees. Former AUB Grounds Committee Chairman Dimitrios Serlis brought several hundred young pine and cypress trees from Palestine and imported seeds and trees from Italy.

In the 1960s, Grace Kirkwood, landscape architect and wife of former AUB President Samuel Kirkwood, designed many areas on campus. She, along with George Battikha, a former municipal director of parks and gardens, made the campus grounds more cosmopolitan, planting trees and shrubs imported from China and South Africa. We lack written records of campus management during the civil war. Mr. Rubeiz managed the campus until the late 1980s, until Anis Abdallah, the current grounds manager, took over.





Decades later, in 1991, late AUB Professor Charles Abou-Chaar would capture the international “nature” of the campus in an *AUB Bulletin*: “Of the big and beautiful trees on campus one may mention the stately Australian Grevillea and Queensland’s Brachychiton with its smooth green stems. Not forgetting of course the beautiful Jacaranda of Brazil, or the Tipu tree of Bolivia, the Coral tree of South Africa, or the Lebbeck tree of tropical Asia.



There are the Acacias and Eucalyptus of Australia, Dombeya and Poinciana from Madagascar, Bombax, Purging Cassia, Bauhinia and several species of Ficus including the Banyan tree, the Bo tree, the Rubber Tree and the Benjamin Tree all from India. The Apple Blossom Cassia comes from Indonesia, the Redbud from West Asia and South Europe. And of course Lebanon’s Cedar and the numerous Oaks, Cypresses, Palms and Pines are all represented.”²

The Future

In the early 2000s, AUB President John Waterbury commissioned the development of a campus master plan, calling for the protection of campus vegetation, particularly in middle campus. AUB Professor of Landscape Architecture Jala Makhzoumi prepared the AUB Middle Campus Landscape (AMICAL) report, hoping to “set a vision and a call for action in planning and managing the campus landscape.”

Today the campus provides a haven for both the AUB community and residents of Beirut. Undergraduates guide nearby school children, along with students at AUB’s University for Seniors, on campus tours. And professors, like me, use the campus grounds as a teaching tool.



The transformation of AUB’s campus into a full-fledged arboretum and botanic garden is long overdue. In 2013, the AUB Arboretum and Botanic Garden Committee (AUBotanic) came into being, with committee members coming from various academic and administrative units. The committee has embarked on the challenging task of locating every tree and shrub, preparing labels and narratives for them, organizing plant tours, and developing a design, management, and fundraising strategy that ensures the continued maintenance and development of AUB’s campus.

AUBotanic will officially launch the AUB Arboretum and Botanic Garden during the University’s 150th celebrations, with special events to be held the third week of April, 2016. If you are interested in playing a part in the launch or support the development of AUB’s green campus in anyway, please contact Professor Salma Talhouk at ntsalma@aub.edu.lb.

-Salma Talhouk, professor, Department of Landscape Design and Ecosystem Management.