

GARDENS

Nurturing Garden of Peace In Times of Trouble

ON THE EVENING of Sept. 11, Habeeb Ahmed came home from work and walked in his garden. There was much weeding and deadheading to do but, uncharacteristically, he did not attend to it. "I just wanted to be in the garden," he says, "to look at the flowers and smell them and see beauty."

The next day, Habeeb sought solace in another garden — this one at the Islamic Center of Long Island in Westbury. The mosque had been the target of a bomb threat after the attack on the World Trade Center,

and police were there for security. But fear was at bay as Habeeb strolled through the garden he planted six years ago and has nurtured ever since. The place where hope grows along with black-eyed Susans and zebra grass and pink magnolias.

The place



Irene Virag

Habeeb Ahmed calls "Allah's Garden."

Habeeb is a senior medical technologist in the pathology lab of St. Francis Hospital in Roslyn. He and his wife, Seemi, live in Searingtown and have three sons — 15-year-old Jibran, 13-year-old Imran and 11-year-old Faraz. They both grew up in India and theirs is what Seemi calls a "semi-arranged marriage." Her parents picked Habeeb, but her mother said she could still marry someone of her own choosing.

"I went to a co-ed college," Seemi says, "but the men were all creeps. I wasn't interested in them. And I thought that my mother knows me better than anyone, even myself. I told her, 'I'm sure you made the right choice.'"

Habeeb came to the United States as a student in 1976; he brought his 19-year-old bride over in 1981. And, like many pilgrims in suburbia, they started a family and built a marriage. It matters to this story that they are partners in gardening as well as life. Seemi's parents are both horticulturists — her mother is retired from a research position at an agricultural university; her father is a consultant to vineyards. Habeeb's late father was a veterinarian who loved the earth, and his garden was abundant with bougainvillea and roses and tropical crotons.

It was not surprising that Habeeb — who is 46 and a board member and former secretary of the Islamic center — should establish a garden in his place of prayer. "I was always talking about how we should do some



Habeeb Ahmed and his wife, Seemi, work on the mosque's garden at the Islamic Center of Long Island in Westbury. Nassau County Police guard the mosque due to bomb threats after Sept. 11's terrorist attacks.

planting at the mosque. 'This is a house of worship,' I said to myself, 'and there are weeds all over, and construction debris.' Then I thought, why do I discuss this? Why don't I just do it and maybe others will join me."

And so he gardened, and they came. Now as the fading flowers of summer bow to autumn, the proof is visible in the borders of white vinca and in the ornamental grasses and cosmos and hostas and liatris and rose of Sharon. On Sunday mornings, about eight to 10 people come to Allah's Garden to share in the miracle of growing things. They start with a small breakfast on the steps of the mosque.

"It's a potluck situation," Habeeb explains in the soft cadence of his native India. "Our caretaker, Mahomed Kachry, works in a bakery so he always brings home leftover pastries; our prayer leader brings tea and coffee. Then we work together. If you drove by here early on Sunday, you'd see us on our hands and knees weeding. We all do everything — we fertilize, weed, plant."

On an October afternoon, Habeeb and Seemi walk about the garden and talk of sun and soil and plants and peace. Of irises that have come and gone. Of tulips and daffodils that grace the spring. Of daylilies and coreopsis that embrace the summer.

Of their love for the country where they have become citizens and established roots. Of what happened on Sept. 11.

"My heart is so heavy, I can't eat," Seemi says. She is a petite, fine-featured woman wearing a white hijab, or head scarf. "There is a dullness, a sadness that is so deep. That people do this in the name of religion — no religion could condone this."

A manned police car is nearby. A second bomb threat occurred the day after the attack.

"You can't blame a community for the actions of individuals," Habeeb says. "Thank God we live in America. The freedoms we have here you don't find anywhere else in the world."

He turns back to the garden. "These hostas are from my home," he says. "I divide plants and bring them here. Right now, my garden at home is a little neglected. I have roses, climbing roses, white and purple liatris, Asiatic and Oriental lilies, peonies, lavender, astilbes, vegetables — tomatoes, bell peppers, okra, white eggplants. I used to grow vegetables on the side of the mosque. But there wasn't enough sun, so I planted hostas, evergreens and three dogwoods. I want to dig out some of these evergreens by the front entrance and put in roses. I have a few roses at home I could spare."

Habeeb points to a trumpet vine that grows on the front of the mosque and on a utility pole. "It came from our house," he says. "Until three or four

weeks ago, it was covered with flowers from top to bottom. It sends out runners — I put them in small pots and give them away as gifts from the mosque."

"He works in the garden here and at home and then his back hurts," Seemi says. "He's never inside the house."

Habeeb smiles his gentle smile. He touches the pink-tinged plumes of the zebra grass.

"The garden makes me feel peaceful," he says. "If you're a God-believing person, it reminds you that He is the creator. It reminds you that spring will come."

In Allah's Garden. In the world. ●