

Featured Garden of the Month – the Japanese Garden

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Relax, Reflect and Discover New Garden Design Ideas when You Visit

Our Demonstration Japanese Garden!

Many of us lead stressful lives that could benefit from a regular retreat to a calm and serene garden space – a space where trees, plants, color and hardscape had been carefully chosen and positioned to create an environment wherein elements of nature are harmonized and we feel at peace when in its embrace. Our demonstration Japanese Garden, known as “The Tranquility Garden,” provides just such a retreat, along with a number of garden ideas you can use in your own landscape planning to create an outdoor space that invites relaxation of the mind and body.



Japanese Gardens have an ancient history that hails back to the 6th century when the influence of Chinese garden design was brought to Japan. Since that time, Japanese Garden design has passed through many stages of thoughtful development and it now takes a number of forms including the Zen

Garden, the Japanese Tea Garden, and the Stroll Garden. Each form relies on elements of nature to create a nurturing environment that invites us to slow down, to appreciate life and to contemplate its meaning. Our demonstration garden is a lovely example of how thoughtful design can bring to life the magic of a secluded garden.

The experience of our garden actually begins with a view from afar. As one approaches, intermittent groupings of mature dark greenery appear to form the outer border of a large oblong-shaped garden. On closer view, one can see that each plant grouping has a fence-panel backdrop – the panel often being made of bamboo. Wide spaces create “windows” between



the groupings, allowing the approaching visitor a glimpse of the interior garden. This exterior/interior garden design element sets the stage for a journey into the garden – a journey that invites contemplation and reflection upon the “interior” meanings of one’s life.

The entrance to our semi-enclosed garden is announced by a simple, yet stately, pagoda-style gate. The softness of its weathered wood is a perfect match for the gentle sweep of the narrow grey gravel pathway that begins at the gate’s threshold and continues on to circumambulate the garden. As part of the journey around the garden, the traveler crosses a brightly painted red bridge that is symbolic of the transitions experienced in life – including those of one’s perceptions and self-awareness. Benches along the walkway face toward the interior of the garden, another metaphor for inward reflection.

Plantings in the garden are primarily non-deciduous, allowing the trees and plants to create a forest-like retreat. In addition to providing year-round green, these trees and plants lend a sense of permanence, stability, serenity and longevity. Japanese Black Pine, Brodia Juniper, Live Oak, Japanese Blueberry and Citrus are among the trees to be found. Plants include Japanese Holly Fern, Dwarf Nandina and Iron Plant. Moss would be a common feature in a Japanese Garden, but it cannot thrive in our climate. In its place, we have used a variety of groundcovers, including Asiatic Jasmine, Mondo Grass and Variegated Prostrate Juniper.

Green is chosen as the predominant color of the garden for several reasons, among them the soothing quality of green and its association with life and vibrancy. Variety is to be found in the types of plants and trees, their varying shades of green and their varying growth habits and leaf shapes. Some areas of the garden are in shade, others are in dappled sunlight – thus adding another layer of variation and

contrast. While loud splashes of colorful flowers are not part of the design, small stands of blooms will be found to mark the seasons.

Water is a key garden feature, both for its symbolism and its practical purpose. All life depends on water, and its movement and flow are indicative of a journey – much like the journey the visitor takes as he/she follows the stream-like gravel path. Pools of water provide nourishment and are a fundamental resource for life.

Accordingly, streams and ponds are common to many forms of Japanese Gardens. When the rain comes, water



pools and flows in areas of our garden. In our dry season, stones laid within the soil suggest a creek bed.

Stones, on the overall, are an important part of the garden hardscape. Smaller stones form the gravel pathway, larger stones are used for the creek bed. Still larger flat stones may represent islands, and boulders may represent mountains. A singular stone lantern represents the idea of a light that guides the journeyer. A raised stone slab forms a bench and a place to rest. Stones endure and represent solid foundation.

Many other thought-provoking symbols can be found in our garden, as well. One is the symbol of a trinity. Groupings of three may serve as metaphors for any number of trinity relationships – for example the trinity representative of the interactions between the Sun and Earth that create a habitat for Life on our planet. Look for groupings of three boulders, three flat stones or three chimes.

In addition to symbol, which invites inner-reflection, there is sensation, which provides interior response to exterior inputs - yet another example of the “interior, exterior” relationship. One of the more popular sensory attractions in of our Japanese Garden is a Shishi Odoshi, or “Deer Scarer,” water fountain. Another is a set of very large and heavy chimes, or gongs.

As the end of the walking journey is neared, the soothing flow of water can be heard as a hinged, water-filled bamboo spout tips its load into a beautifully hewn, hollowed-out stone basin. The falling water and the regular knocking of the bamboo onto the stone add an element of sound to the surroundings. This water feature serves several purposes. One is as a simple and thoughtful handwashing basin, as would be traditionally found at the entrance of a garden tea house. Another is as a rhythmic sound source that is conducive to meditation as one relaxes on a nearby bench. Historically, such water features were used by farmers to frighten away hungry birds and deer!

The gongs in the garden are extremely heavy, and are therefore silent unless a strong wind shoves the large flat disk clapper attached to the striker chain, or a visitor deliberately does the same. As sound vibrations carry through the atmosphere, our inner ear catches their tune. External breezes naturally move through the trees, creating the soft rustle of leaves – creating the inner voice of the garden. Gongs require a stronger and more decisive external effort to have their song brought to life – just as one's life journey requires decision, determination and movement.

A stroll through our Japanese Garden can be an inspiration in so many ways. Why not make a visit to unwind, to reflect and to be inspired by useful ideas you can use to create a special retreat of your own. When you come, be sure to look for an onsite kiosk where you will find printed information about the garden.

Interviews:

Tracy Pereira – Japanese Garden Co-Chair (In-person interview)

Cheryl Huber – former Japanese Garden Chair (Phone interview)

Website Resources:

www.japanesegardening.org

https://mastergardenproducts.com/gardenerscorner/japanese_stroll_garden.htm

<https://fbmg.org/demonstration-gardens/japanese-garden/>

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