

# Asian Garden Design

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October 7, 2011



## Creating a Japanese-style garden

What do we seek as we spend time in our gardens? As a landscaper, I find that observing changes in plants, and their visual interplay with other elements, nourishes our need for tranquility. Chaos bombarding us every day gives our gardens added value as refuges from the external world.

Gardens can also play an important role in improving the quality of groundwater. This became clear when I attended a workshop last spring. Images of the Puget Sound region revealed the staggering amount of paving and building. This results in storm water - the rainwater running off roofs and down sidewalks, driveways, and parking lots - affecting the health of the creatures of the Salish Sea (the traditional name for Puget Sound.) Instead of being filtered through forests and fields, storm water carries oil, gasoline and other pollutants directly into the nearest lake, river or sea. A monoculture 'lawn' slows water flow, but doesn't provide nearly the level of filtration that is possible by using more complex plantings. By replacing lawns with trees, shrubs, and other plants, we help cleanse the storm water of these pollutants.

## Creating a refuge

A Japanese-style garden combines potentially environmentally-friendly landscape elements with the atmosphere of a calming refuge. Such a garden provides more habitat than a lawn, can incorporate native plants, and can be designed to require no fertilizers, pesticides or mowing. Japanese gardens conjure up words such as elegant and natural, tended and effortless, yin (the still and the feminine) and yang (the moving and the male)—opposing ideas that can harmonize in the garden. Japanese gardens follow nature's lead.

In a Japanese garden, different areas flow from one to the next. Larger sections are broken into smaller portions, each with a focal point, such as a sculpture. Asymmetry is an important element in Asian art and design, utilized with stunning results in these gardens. Unlike traditional European gardens, Asian gardens feature odd numbers of plants and stones spaced unevenly.

Shinto is the indigenous religion of Japan. Shinto worship recognizes the spiritual powers of the natural world: mountains, trees, rocks and waterfalls are key intersections of the common world with the sacred. I once had the honor of assisting in the preparation of a woodland around a Shinto shrine in the Rocky Mountains. I was instructed to prune

trees to create an appearance of being clean, yet natural and flowing. It was delightful to honor and accentuate the meanderings naturally offered by the plants.



**Left:** Fire, water, metal, stone and wood are elements used directly, or symbolically, in Japanese gardens. The color red symbolizes fire. The footbridge in Seattle's Kubota Garden features flame-bright railings. **Center:** A Japanese stone lantern is nestled between a rhododendron and a pine. **Right:** Stepping stones also illustrate the asymmetry of an Asian garden. **Photos by Ann Brooking.**

### **Earth, wood and fire in the garden**

Japanese gardens incorporate representations of the elements of wood, fire, earth, water, and metal. Plants represent the element of wood. Use of traditional Japanese materials such as bamboo can convey authenticity. Do be aware of bamboos that have runners - many varieties are invasive. Ask at your favorite Skagit County nursery for non-invasive varieties or effective root barriers.

Use flowers with restraint, and feature them as individual specimens. Even a single bonsai pine can offer the peace of a Japanese garden. Evergreens, especially dwarf conifers, are commonly featured. The vine maple is a northwest native that lends itself to pruning. You can also incorporate a wide variety of Japanese maples that grow well in our climate.

The color red symbolizes fire, as would a fire pit or a plant with a spiky form such as iris. Something as small as a birdbath can represent water. The reflection on water is particularly appealing in dark winter months. The brightness of a gray sky reflected on a still bowl of water lifts my spirit. A swath of stones can represent a riverbed and serve as the water element. Stones also represent the element of earth. You can use metal wind chimes, bells, or sculptures as your metal element.

### **Weeding as a meditation**

A Japanese garden requires attention to achieve the appearance of effortless grace, so be realistic about the degree to which you will tend the garden. If you don't have much time, and you want the space to look authentic, choose a small area such as a patio and enclose it with a bamboo screen or hedge of shrubs. You can add features such as wind chimes, stones, bonsai or a water feature. If you are creating a larger garden (and have a larger budget) you can include paths, bridges, and a pavilion.

To make your garden a haven for insects and other wildlife, always use organic practices. Use native plants, since they are well adapted to our environment, accustomed to growing without fertilizers or pesticides. Weeding by hand can become a meditative practice in your garden oasis.

For a deeper understanding of Asian garden design, you can explore feng shui (pronounced *fung shway*), a Chinese system using plants, objects and color to create environmental balance. A garden incorporating feng shui doesn't need to look Asian, but Asian gardens traditionally utilize principles of feng shui.

## RESOURCES

- Garden Feng Shui, A Beginner's Guide, Roni Jay, Hooder & Stroughten, 1999
- Landscaping in the Pacific Northwest: Native Plants, WSU Clark County Extension, Watershed Stewards: <http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/ws/native-plants.pdf>
- Gardening with Native Plants, Arthur R. Kruckeberg University of Washington Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1996
- Japanese Gardens: Tranquility, Simplicity, Harmony, by Geeta k. Mehta and Kimie Tada, Tuttle Publishing, North Clarendon, VT, 2008
- The Healing Garden: A Natural Haven for Body, Senses and Spirit, by Sue Minter, Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1993
- Kubota Garden, 9817 – 55<sup>th</sup> Avenue S, Seattle, WA