

Gardens of the World

By Jane Billingham

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From ancient China to the contemporary Northwest, they all offer inspiration

As Master Gardeners we learn the preferred growing conditions of a rhododendron or the likelihood of late blight decimating the tomatoes, but there is more to gardening than plant identification, soil amendments, and beneficial insects. People take up gardening for many different reasons. Some gardeners want a large weed-free lawn that evokes an English landscape park; for others, a chamomile lawn or no lawn at all better reflects their worldview and values. Some gardeners enjoy the thrill of combat with vegetation; others prefer to sit or play in a landscape that largely takes care of itself. Some want a place to entertain; others, a secluded retreat. All are legitimate ways to garden.

Many people travel to find inspiration for their gardens. Not all garden styles translate well to different climate zones, but all can fire the gardener's imagination.

Some of the earliest gardens were created in desert regions. The Islamic garden or *chahar* (=four) *bagh* (=garden) is a rectangular walled garden intersected by four channels with a central pool or pavilion. The movement of water cools the air and soothes the senses; the walls provide a secluded space where trees and flowers can be grown away from the scorching desert heat. This style of garden traveled north to Andalusia in Spain and east to Mughal India and can be found in places such as The Alhambra in Grenada and the Taj Majal.

China has the oldest continuous tradition of garden design of the world. Many of the gardens we know in China today were retreats for the elite scholar-officials of the Ming dynasty. These gardens are labyrinths of courtyards linked by pebble paths and unfolding a series of glimpsed views. With their rocks and water features, they offer in miniature a representation of the wider landscape outside the garden walls. Japanese gardens offer meandering pathways through tapestries of green that concentrate attention on an individual plant or a single moment in time. A Japanese garden invites us to slow down, to sit for a while to watch a cherry blossom unfurl or a maple leaf flame from green to red.

Monastery gardens in medieval Europe were created behind high stone walls. In these protected spaces, monks grew medicinal herbs and orchard fruits while wolves and evil spirits roamed the deep dark forests outside. When the Renaissance came to Europe, there was a great cultural flowering in gardens as well as in the arts.



Islamic-style garden, Palacio de Mondragon, Ronda, Spain - Photo by Jane Billinghamurst.



Geometric French Garden
Chenonceau, Loire Valley, France

The French used advances in mathematics to manipulate space with geometric axes to create seemingly endless vistas that marched out into the surrounding countryside. Le Notre, who arrived at Versailles in 1662, made that garden his masterpiece. Its size and layout demonstrated the supreme mastery of Louis XIV over nature (and by extension, over pretty much everything else).

In Italy, the gardens hearkened back to ancient Rome, when Pliny wrote about the delights of his country villas. Gardens such as the Villa d'Este, which can still be visited today, were filled with clipped evergreens, statues, pools, and shell-encrusted grottoes. In both Italy and France, water powered fountains and automata in the shape of birds that sang or organs that played. Water jokes were in favor, where garden visitors found themselves soaked by hidden jets as they strolled the grounds.

In northern Europe, elaborate flower beds (or parterres) were laid out with low hedges and colorful plants or colored gravel in imitation of the ornamental scrollwork on costly fabric. These jewels were designed to be admired from the upper balconies of lavish palaces or country houses.

By the eighteenth century, the English were busy creating the English landscape garden. They banished the formal parterres of the French and the clipped evergreens of the Italians. They blurred the distinction between the garden and its surrounding landscape, designing pleasure grounds with pastoral views, Roman-style temples, underground grottoes, and winding walks through wooded hills.

The English went on to develop the double herbaceous perennial border of Victorian times and the intensely colorful carpet bedding schemes still favored by many cities today. Then along came William Robinson to extol the virtues of wildflowers in a natural setting.

As gardeners, we have all these styles and more to draw from when we create our own landscapes. The WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener Discovery Garden includes 24 different styles of gardens, all of which do well in the Pacific Northwest, including a Japanese garden, an English Cottage garden, a Waterwise garden, and Naturescapes, a garden that showcases native plants. Visit <http://www.skagit.wsu.edu/MG/discovery-gardens.htm> to see pictures of the gardens or visit in person at 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway) in Mount Vernon.

Whether we garden vicariously through garden visits or create a personal garden at home, each of us can choose the type of garden with which we are most comfortable and where we would most like to spend our time.



At Left: Rock from Lake Tai at the Lingering Garden, Suzhou, China

Above: Modern parterre design, RHS Wisley, England

Below: Contemplative space at the Portland Japanese Garden, Oregon

(All three photos by Jane Billingham)



Take a tour

- What:** Gardens of the World, a WSU Know & Grow Workshop. Skagit County Master Gardener Jane Billinghamurst will take you on a tour of gardens around the world. Using photographs she has taken from her travels and extracts from historical and contemporary sources, she will illustrate the many different ways in which people design and enjoy their gardens.
- When:** 1 – 2:30 PM on Tuesday, November 15
- Where:** WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center
16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)
- Cost:** Free (First come – first served)
- Information:** Call 360-428-4270 ext. 0 for additional information



The author enjoying a modern take on “water jokes” in the fairy ring in The Enchanted Forest at Winterthur, Pennsylvania. Photo by Tom Lebovsky.

Resources:

- www.gardenvisit.com: lists of gardens to visit around the world with comments on historical styles
- Penelope Hobhouse, *Story of Gardening*