

Design a Japanese-style Garden to Create a Contemplative Space

By Kathy Wolfe
July 3, 2015



Serenity and tranquility

In an age of ever-increasing noise and activity, the chance to catch a moment of silent serenity and contemplation feels like a breath of fresh air, at once re-centering and refreshing. Creating such a personal space can be achieved following fundamental design concepts found in Japanese gardens.

Japanese garden design originated in China during the Asuka period (approximately 538 – 710) when travelling Japanese merchants witnessed gardens being built in China and brought these ideas back to Japan. Over time these garden plans evolved to become the Japanese style we are familiar with today.

There are several types of garden styles: the Japanese strolling garden, the dry or sand garden and tea house and courtyard gardens.

The Japanese strolling garden traditionally was created by nobility and royalty on a large scale and features meandering paths, hidden garden benches and strategically placed lanterns. The journey through the garden, rather than a specific destination, is the goal here. The visitor is guided toward an understanding of the oneness of nature and toward an experience of harmony, peace and fulfillment. Ponds and paths are often of irregular shape and reveal hidden treasures along the way.

Dry or sand gardens (sometimes called Zen gardens) often use bold rocks, stretches of mowed turf and raked gravel (which is easier to work with than sand). These elements represent mountains, islands and water in a larger landscape. Some gardens use these features as symbols for a deity such as Buddha or to tell a particular story. Spaces are often walled to reduce distraction and aid in meditation and are viewed from inside or from a veranda. The area is not entered except to conduct general maintenance. Empty areas in the garden plan are considered as important as the planted areas, and stones are added to create accents.

Japanese tea house and courtyard gardens are similar to each other and generally are enclosed, of a smaller scale, emphasize nature, and are used to quiet the mind from the outside world.

Basic elements of a Japanese garden include rocks (which signify solidity and permanence), water (the life-giving force, often represented with raked gravel, and signifying change and impermanence), and plants (reflecting the tapestry of the four seasons and a combination of permanence and impermanence). Each of these items is selected with great care and often appears in uneven number sets. The final garden design is influenced by Japanese culture's appreciation for art, poetry, religion and philosophy. The goal of any Japanese garden is to encourage the visitor to be present and connected in the moment.



Traditional elements of Japanese gardens include bridges, such as this one at the Nitobe Memorial Garden in Vancouver, British Columbia, which create harmonious reflections and the feeling of serenity. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

How can the Western gardener incorporate this aesthetic into our own landscape? You may first want to sit in the garden area you wish to transform and look at the space itself. What do you envision for your garden: a spot for meditation, a strolling garden, a contemplative space? Pick a theme and begin researching this type of garden by visiting it in person, in books or online. Picture how your home and garden can most strongly and smoothly be integrated together, an important part of Japanese design.

Work with what you have and map out your plan. A Japanese garden is intended to replicate the natural world in a smaller space so details are important.

If your yard is flat, you can add a small mound or two to add interest. If your land is sloped, you might consider adding a waterfall or stream that follows the lay of the area. Even a smaller yard can accommodate a strolling garden concept by placing stones in a serpentine pattern and surrounding them with a moss-looking ground cover. The path can disappear gracefully around a corner and dead end at a fence or other yard boundary.

Plants should be chosen carefully to provide year round interest. Picture how the plan will appear in the dead of winter as well as at the height of summer and spring. Incorporate basic garden structural plants such as conifers and broad-leaved trees. Each plant should be selected for leaf color, bark, stems and even branching patterns. Asymmetry is the goal. Irregularly shaped trees such as Japanese maples and pines are often used. Keep your basic design cleanly simple. Other plants to consider might be bamboo, maples, cherry blossom trees, azalea, camellia, iris and moss.

Water can be used to create ambient sound that is conducive to meditation. If room for a waterfall or stream is not available, you might incorporate a carved stone basin or a deer chaser (a hollow rod which fills with water then pours into another basin before returning to its original position, creating a loud knock).



This stone pathway over a dry creek bed entices the visitor to explore around the bend in the Nitobe Memorial Garden. *Photo by Trish Varrelman / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Enclosures are often used to block visual distractions. Fences are generally made of natural materials, such as woody bamboo stems, cedar boards or clay plaster. Remember to include a bench made from natural materials that blends with your overall design to create a seating area for contemplation or viewing.

Gates can be built with open grid work or a lath design can be used to enclose the space but simultaneously invite the eye into the garden beyond. Many traditional styles have arching horizontal top rails, reflecting the curve of temple roofs. A moon gate can be designed to be fully open from overhead to the ground, as is traditional, or modified

to be a round opening at the upper half of the gate. Many creative ideas are available in Japanese gardens, in publications and on the Internet.

Other design features that can be used include bridges, lanterns, pavilions, pagodas, and Japanese lanterns. Remember that the goal is to achieve a place that is pleasingly simple, tranquil, timeless, beautiful and serene, so don't overdo the ornamentation.

Creating a space for quiet reflection and renewing a connection with the natural world is well worth the effort in any garden, big or small. Where will your journey take you?

RESOURCES:

- "Garden Design Lessons from Japan." Billy Goodnick. Fine Gardening.com.
- "East Comes West." Lindsay Taylor. [Martha Stewart Living Magazine](#).
- "Japanese Gardens for North Americans." E. Chute and A Japanese Garden. Copyright 2003 – 2015.
- "Lay of the Landscape: Create the Beauty of a Japanese Garden." Marianne Lipanoch. Houzz.com.