

## Bringing Japan's ancient art to American gardens Creating an epitome of nature

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By Vincent Soberano

Warriors and monks of ancient Japan were said to do most of their training in picturesque, tranquil gardens. The natural serenity of these gardens gave the Samurai warriors an atmosphere conducive to meditation so as to "focus, clear the mind and strengthen the spirit." Today, many Americans are realizing that need for a special place of recollection and meditation within their own homes. They have adopted the Japanese influence in a variety of ways in an attempt to create the Japanese ideal - a design that expresses nature in microcosm. There are, however, many problems in re-creating an authentic Japanese garden.

Importing and transporting a purely Japanese landscape to American soil is fraught with great difficulty. Among the long list of obstacles are the differences in the topography and climate. In Japan, plants actually grow slower than in rocky soil and misty summers. Another problem is the lack of water resources, especially in California. Japan has an abundance of natural springs, ponds, waterfalls and a steady rainfall. And the, most significantly, one has to find not only a master of Japanese landscape design but also a team of skilled artisans to maintain the work.

All these problems may be overcome, however, with the basic knowledge of what a Japanese garden truly is and the philosophy and principles that stand behind its grace and beauty.

To most Japanese, a Japanese gardener is a highly respected master of an ancient art. Years of proper training and a deep sensitivity to nature and the environment is required. In North County, there are two such masters: Bill Watanabe is a Carlsbad based landscaper who installs and maintain Japanese gardens for residential and commercial clients. **Takendo Arii**, from Rancho Penasquitos, is a landscape architect who lists, among his many credits, the design and creation of Sea World's Japanese Garden and that of Golden Door health spa in San Marcos.



Both men presented a multitude of ideas and thoughts on a practical design and creation of Japanese gardens in California. To design and

construct an original garden, Arii stresses the importance of the essentials of Japanese garden composition: Harmony, balance and rhythm.

Watanabe describes the Japanese garden as one that mimics nature. All the materials used, he said, are natural, such as rocks, vegetation and sand. Unlike flowery French and Spanish gardens, Japanese gardens are smaller, simpler and do not have one central focal point such as a statue or a fountain. The entire garden, Watanabe said, is the "center of itself."

There are rules of design to be followed, according to Watanabe and Arii. For instance, nothing is symmetrical in a Japanese garden. There are no straight lines and 90-degree angles. Mounds are created to change the elevation. Everything must be where nature would have placed it. Winding pathways give the visitor an illusion of greater space as each section of the garden displays its own unique beauty, leaving an experience of peace and tranquility. The magnificent setting, as a whole, truly becomes nourishing for body and soul.

The problem, according to Watanabe, is trying to copy a garden in Japan to the last leaf. Most Japanese plants are not suited for California's climate. Thus, said Watanabe, it is best to use plants and materials that can be found locally.

"It's a 100 percent compromise to work with Mother Nature," Watanabe said. He added that a visit to Japanese nurseries such as Iwaisako Nursery in Vista could help one choose the right plants and materials to make the garden look aesthetically Japanese.

Arii pointed out that the strong sunlight is detrimental to Japanese plants. He also stressed the importance of watering. With the drought situation, one has to resort to alternatives. Watanabe recommends using a micro-jet, a watering device that works on extremely low pressure but waters just as efficiently as any good sprinkler system.

For a more traditional look, one can also install a ka-ke-hi, translated as "bamboo waterfall." The ka-ke-hi is made out of a bamboo pipe that takes minimal pressure of water then channels it into a natural rock basin which, in turn, lets the water flow evenly in all directions, feeding directly underground. Arii also recommended creating a pond with a drainage system that distributes water throughout the garden.

Watanabe and Arii also suggest using the principles and philosophies of the art itself as opposed to "just copying a Japanese garden from a picture."

"I recommend using Japanese elements with local materials," Arii said. "My opinion is that we should make an American-Japanese garden, a mixture of two styles," he added. "It is not only a Japanese art. It is an understanding of the rules."

"There are different eras of design," Arii continue. "I can't say what the modern Japanese garden is -it is only an abstract idea. The styles are always changing. But the element- the philosophy-remains the same."

The history of the Japanese garden has reflected the sociopolitical changes of Japan itself. Arii points out the rock garden of the Ryoan-ji

Temple of Kyoto, for instance. Built in 1499, it is, to this day, considered by experts to be one of the finest constructions of its type. As a rock and sand garden, it has no trees, shrubs, or grass. The only vegetation is moss growing on the moist rocks. Tourists often stare, mute and befuddled, at the garden, trying to figure out exactly what it means. Some see it as miniature version of mountainscape and oceans; others regard it as Zen's fathomless void.

"It really doesn't matter what one 'sees,'" Arii explained. "Just like the Japanese gardens of today, each person is allowed to see what he wants. It is a garden of imagination."

Because of the need for masters in Japanese garden art such as Watanabe and Arii, the expense of simply designing the garden may be beyond most homeowner's budgets. Nonetheless, it is still possible to lay out a private Japanese garden without the help of a specialist, according to Watanabe. All that is required is creativity and an awareness of nature's rules. Watanabe advises the beginner to follow these steps:

- Get books on Japanese garden art and design. Most libraries and booksellers carry many authentic version
- Determine your basic layout (paths, mounds, background, ponds,etc)
- Find an Oriental nursery with shaped trees and bonsai. Ask them howto maintain and care for these plants
- Make sure to install conventional irrigation and lighting

The important thing to keep in mind, Watanabe says, is not to be in a hurry. Like nature itself, a Japanese garden acquires its physical beauty from the careful hands of a patient artist and its tranquility from Mother Nature's gentle touch. Take a walk in the woods and observe its natural beauty and harmony. Absorb this knowledge and re-create it. This is the principle of a true Japanese garden.