

## Confronted by Chrysanthemums

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By Jeff Spurrier

When asked about the steady decline in the number of Japanese gardeners in California, Bill Kondo, the Executive Secretary of the Southern California Gardeners Federation, shrugged it off as the natural progression of upwardly mobile Japanese-Americans. Obviously, second, third, and fourth generation offspring have preferred the professions to pruning shears. It was not, however, until after a conversation with **Takendo Arii** in Mira Mesa that I realized the semantic gap that Mr. Kondo and I had failed to bridge. To Kondo and many Americans, a Japanese gardener is a person with works as a gardener and happens to be of Japanese ancestry. To Arii and most Japanese, a Japanese gardener is a highly respected master of an ancient art. It requires years of training and a deep sensitivity to nature to create what many scholars believe to be one of the most representative forms of Japanese art - the Japanese garden.

Fortunately for San Diego, Takendo Arii is one of the few Japanese in California who specializes in the classic tradition. He graduated from the Tokyo Agricultural University with a degree in landscape architecture, and first came to America to study horticulture in Los Angeles, hoping eventually to work here. After a year, however, he returned to Japan to spend an apprenticeship under an gardens. Arii's reasoning for this cultural about-face was that even with his degree and overseas study, he felt that he would not have been able to create a true Japanese garden, had he been asked. Seven years ago, though, he returned to America bringing his wife and a residence visa. He began working for Sea World in Mission Bay, gradually slipping into other Sea World projects in, Ohio and Florida. After receiving his own contracting license he was finally ready to embark on his own dreams to design and construct an original garden using the essential principles of Japanese garden composition: harmony, balance, rhythm. The opportunity came when a friend recommended him to tile owners of the Golden Door health spot in North County.

One hot Saturday afternoon Arii took me on a tour of the gardens he has made



at the Golden Door. As we walked over the wooden bridge that leads to the lobby he explained some of the philosophy of the Japanese Garden. "I had an opportunity to look at some Japanese-style gardens here in California. But I couldn't really find a true Japanese garden. Most people including some Japanese-American gardeners believe that a Japanese garden simply has a Japanese stone lantern and a black pine and perhaps a carp pond. Now, a true Japanese garden does sometimes have these things, but they are not the whole garden. The idea of the Japanese garden is to create the beauty-point"

"It's difficult to explain the Yosemite you can see trees and hear the sound of water, and if you're an artist perhaps you'll find just what tile beauty-point of that is. Many People believe that the Japanese garden is a natural garden that the stones and plants are just as they are in nature. But this idea is quite different from the way we Japanese describe natural. We think of the perfect beauty of a natural thing and we try to keep, to maintain that beauty. We must use harmony and balance to re-create the perfect beauty of natural things. **We have to arrange rocks and plants and water and trees to make a perfect scene with each part working together.**"

Arii's "beauty-point" is an abstract concept essential to his philosophy. It is difficult to explain in English because it represents a specific Perceptual awareness resulting from more than a thousand years of garden development. The history of tile Japanese garden is one that has mirrored the social and political change of Japan it-self. The original gardens of Heian times were spacious affairs, usually containing a take and several islands. They provided a rich, showy backdrop for the festive parties thrown by the powerful lords of Japan not yet united into one nation. It was not for several hundred more years, under the influence of imported Buddhism, that the gardens began to contract in size and take on a more introspective, symbolic design.

The rock garden of the Ryoan-ji "Temple of Kyoto was built in 1499 and to this day is considered one of the finest constructions of its type. Like most rock gardens it has trees, shrubs, or grass. During the summer months the temple is crowded with rubber-necking tourists of all nationalities, standing mute and befuddled, trying to figure out what it all means. Interpretations range from a miniature version of a seascape to the fathomless void of Zen. It doesn't really matter what one "Sees," for as Arii explained, "it is a garden of the imagination. In the sand garden each person is allowed to see what he wants. The Bosan, the priests, created these gardens but they are only one type of Japanese garden. When they see sand, they may imagine a sea or a river, just as a rock may be a mountain top or an island." He led us around to an area still under construction where he is planning to make a rock garden. There would be only the obligatory odd number of stones set in a brilliant white sea of sand. It would like "about a month" to get things right.

Getting things right for any garden, be it a dry landscape, a rock garden, a teahouse garden, or a wet landscape, involves numerous preliminary sketches of the idea. The artist must consider the garden from every angle, somewhat in the manner of a set designer of a play. The architecture and the surrounding environment must be considered, too, in arranging the proper balance and rhythm. Since all the buildings at the Golden Door are constructed in Japanese style, the task of "bringing the garden into the house" was greatly simplified for Arii.

"The site of the Golden Door is just like Japan," he said. "'The buildings are surrounded by mountains. There are many oak trees and small streams, so it's a good location to express just what a Japanese garden is."

The gardens outside the guest rooms are narrow by American standards, but the fashion in which they are linked together is a delightful display of polymorphous continuity. It is possible to stand on a small hill and look at the garden in its entirety as it twists- and bends in front of the windows of each room. Arii pointed out a small hill that he had built up and covered with grass. The reason for this was to mold a shape that would mirror the rolling slope of the shoulders of a small mountain, a mile in the distance. It is just this sort of attention to detail that fills the Japanese garden with little surprises. The paths are laid out in a winding fashion to give the illusion of a greater space. Bamboo is planted on both sides of a fence to create the feeling of the Garden growing in an unbroken line to the edge of the mountain undergrowth. Water trickling down through the garden is carefully channeled to produce just the right tone as it splashes on the rock. A waterfall is made to disappear behind a center stone in the face of a small cliff only to emerge again, spread out in a thin glossy layer.

Unfortunately, some of these line points are not always appreciated by the visitors to the Golden Door. The scarecrow," a rocking bamboo pipe that tips it fills with water, and thus makes a hollow knocking clap, on its backswing, had to be padded with foam rubber since some found the noise annoying. This doesn't bother Arii, for he realizes some adaptation is necessary to make the Japanese garden palatable to Americans. What does bother him is tire inattention to the rules that he finds in some "Japanese gardens" made in America. "We must remember that there were Japanese gardens over a thousand years ago, and there were different gardens five hundred and a hundreds years ago. I can't say what the modern Japanese garden is it's only an abstract idea. The style is always changing. But there are some rules we cannot change.

"Originally the stone lantern, or the rock basin was only in the teahouse garden, but that's changing now so we can mix them up with other types of gardens. But the positioning of the lantern or of the rocks or trees- the harmony and balance-those are basic rules that must stay the same.

"We say 'motomari.' It means harmony in the garden. I can't find it sometimes. They put the trees here and the pond there and the stones over there, but everything is separate. Nothing is working together. For rhythm, for example, when we position stones in a walkway we never form a cross with four stone placed in a square pattern. The pattern must always be a T shape, with two rocks side by side and a long rock over them. This must always be done.

"My opinion is that we should make an American-Japanese garden, a mixture of these two styles. It is not only a Japanese art. It is an understanding of the rules." In contracting for a Japanese garden, there are other things to take into account, too, principally time and money. In Japan it is possible to buy full-grown trees and shrubs from a nursery so that when the garden is completed it exists in its finished final stage, In America, frequently the trees or shrubs are much younger when planted and therefore the final scene is not realized for five or ten years.

Because of the need for specialists in Japanese garden design, such as Takendo Arii, the expense of simply designing the garden may be beyond most homeowners' budgets. Usually traditional gardens are built for hotels or restaurants that can afford to have special technicians brought in from Japan. The Otani Hotel in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo, for example, reportedly is spending a quarter of a million dollars for a garden that will take up "a very small area." The president of Lotte Candy Corporation in Japan is planning on a half-million-dollar garden to be

made for a hotel Lotte is building in Korea. Beyond the construction costs, of course, there are maintenance requirements. At the Golden Door the bushes must be pruned once a month and the pines twice a year. And if one is insisting on true authenticity, the handmade stone lanterns and rock basins must be purchased in Japan.

It is possible, certainly, to lay out a private Japanese garden without the help of a specialist. All that is required is taste and an awareness of the rules. Most public libraries stock a number of books on both the structure and philosophy of the Japanese garden. The important thing to remember is: don't be in a hurry. Even if the closest you have been to Japan is a bowl of instant Ramen, with patience and endurance you too can be like the priest in Basho's poem and sit down to your morning tea, "in utter silence - confronted by chrysanthemums."