
The Impact of Simplicity - Design in the Japanese Style

Frank Robinson

Richmond, Virginia

Gardens are, for most of us, a labor of love—at least as long as mother nature cooperates with us, and is moderate in her blessings of rain, summer sun, ice and assorted biblical plagues! Many people, however, are frustrated with the outcome of their efforts—the finished look evades them; the idyllic dream in their mind looks far different in reality; the garden itself becomes an ever-demanding voracious stepchild that needs more and more attention, and doesn't give hugs in return!

One of the major causes of that gap between our inspired vision and reality is a lack of design in the garden, or a design which is too ambitious. For those of us who have inherited the western concept of the garden as a complexity, and who are often inclined to assemble horticultural zoos in our gardens (one or two of everything interesting), a goal in mind is a valuable asset. Plans do not have to be elaborate, but the garden creator must make some basic decisions about what the garden is to be in its essence—a quiet shaded retreat, a symphony of color, a natural garden of native species, or a functional place to entertain? No matter what the ultimate goal, we often make the job more difficult than it is by not knowing where to stop. The same problems arise in interior decorating—when one more pattern or one more accent piece puts the room over the edge. Overload happens in gardens far too often.

The issue of design in the garden is particularly fascinating when cultural traditions are compared. The process or activity of gardening is universal, but the end product is vastly different from culture to culture. I find the Japanese experience in garden design to be both beautiful and inspiring. I think its strengths lie in the principle that often, less is more.

Simple design can be elegant, relaxing, quieting and, in its own way, dramatic. In the Japanese tradition, gardens were often spaces created for retreat, contemplation and healing. It is for these reasons, I believe, individuals of western traditions find them so appealing. It would be a mistake to assume that design is simplistic. This is far from the truth, but the craft and artistry of the design result in wonderfully beautiful spaces which have a universal appeal to the human soul.

There are specific cultural reasons which have guided the design traditions of the Japan—including the Shinto perception of the animation of all natural elements—trees, rocks, plants, water, etc. The Shinto religion focuses, in part, on the "aweness" of life. That "aweness" can often be seen and felt in garden spaces in Japan. Additionally, Buddhism taught the value of contemplation and of striving for oneness with nature. The expression of these values and the efforts to create spaces enhancing these goals are other familiar experiences in the gardens of Japan.

Japan is an older culture than ours in the United States, and one with stronger, more consistent traditions. There is overall a greater respect for nature in the Japanese culture, strongly steeped in their traditional arts, architecture and celebrations—a stronger sense of connection to the natural world. There is willingness to go the extra mile in gardening technique to ensure the well-being and unique characteristics of a majestic and venerable plant in the garden scheme. This is often seen in the tedious installation of support poles to old pines with elongated limbs, and the elaborate "snow

umbrellas" erected to support branches through the heavy snows of winter. Similar techniques can be seen in older cultures in western Europe as well.

Gardens in Japan are often intended to guide one through a mental journey. They try to focus attention, let one escape the temporal world, assist one to rise to a higher level of consciousness and concentration, and help one to value the beauty and richness of the natural world around us. They often attempt to idealize nature—to take plants and plant combinations beyond what nature herself may offer. This may be done through training techniques, pruning, bonsai, and careful combination of plants for their interactive effects of color, texture, form, etc. The intent is to bring out the ideal or "inner nature" of the plant or garden element (rocks, water) to help one see the spirit within or the spirits about. These values are not unique to Japan—many such ideals are found in native American traditions for instance—but are perhaps most effectively applied to garden design in the Japanese culture.

Gardens in Japan challenge the definition of the traditional garden in the western mind. Our perception of "a garden" involves a given plot of land, cultivated in some way, with a collection of plants with some purpose in mind. At what point does the act of gardening, no matter how constrained, create and define a garden? A container with a single plant intensely cultivated? A single row of bamboo carefully coifed and pruned to resemble a pompommed poodle? A small corner of land adorned with a plant and a rock, and perhaps a lantern? Is a bonsai a garden? How about an espaliered pear tree? Is a garden a critical mass, or a state of mind for its creator or participant?

Garden spaces in Japan are often small. It has been a crowded land for centuries. The limit of geographic space forced creativity in garden design, careful selection of plants to be used for maximum effect, and a refined sense of innuendo and suggestion.

Our western traditions have been different. Gardens were at first, in western

Europe, utilitarian collections of medicinal herbs cultivated at monasteries. They later became private domains of the wealthy as they collected exotica from around the globe through European exploration and colonization. Design became formal, expansive and complex, as seen in the Italian, Dutch and French traditions. Gardens were "plant rich" and "object rich", meant to dazzle and impress, places to entertain, places of stimulation, and places to experience the fullness of life. Yes, there were cottage gardens and potagers, but the definitive ethos of European gardens were those of the royals and the financially successful.

We have continued those traditions in America, even in our breeding efforts. Although much of our genetic management was initialized to find plants that were disease resistant and climate adaptive, much of our modern efforts focus on the bigger, better, and most unique plant able to be created—the Burpee white marigold or the elusive blue rose.

The contrast then is one of stimulation versus contemplation. I do not wish to be misunderstood to say that these positions cannot be reversed. There are "object rich" gardens in Japan, and restraint found in western gardens. These are, however, the exceptions not the rules.

We can find the "experience" of the Japanese garden here at home. It most often occurs in nature—at mountain tops, in redwood forests, in pine groves and in beautiful blooming meadows. Here there is a "oneness" and a sense of awe. These perhaps best describe the goal of "simplicity". I believe there is a longer tradition of experimentation with minimalism and the capturing the essence of nature in the Japanese tradition.

Some techniques which I find to be consistently used in successful design of gardens in Japan are included in the following list. Some simple analysis of your garden might help you to evolve your garden toward one of greater simplicity, increased pleasure, and deeper satisfaction.

(1) Restrain the plant palate. Use only

a few species of plants in one garden; repeat the same plant, and use plants with strong design impact. If you are an azalean, your plant of choice is already known for the backbone of your garden. Now choose only those plants which will enhance and complement the azalea scheme.

(2) Unify the garden through repetition of form and materials. There is a unity of experience through consistent use of plant types, rocks, ground covers, water, structural elements, etc., which define the spirit of the garden. Is your garden one of tall, upright tree trunks? If so, attempt to maximize the impact by emphasizing this attribute. Is yours a shady garden? Tie it all together with a ground cover of uniform color and texture—e.g., the moss garden at Saihoji. Keep your paving materials consistent. Use all rounded, soft rock forms, or all jagged, rough forms.

(3) Introduce elements which guide one through the garden both physically and visually—pathways, walks, fencing, edging materials, hedges. The most commonly used tools of this category are walkways and small knee-high fencing along them, both of which display a phenomenal range of creativity and use of varied natural and man-made materials.

(4) Replicate and enhance natural elements throughout the garden, creating harmony and rhythm. These include pruning to emphasize the structure of trees; shearing of plants to mimic significant rocks in the landscape; use of rocks to represent waterfalls or waterways; the strategic placement of plants to maximize their impact on the experience of the garden; attention to the elements of texture, color and form; focusing the visitor's attention on the detail of

a particular element within the whole of the garden (the specimen tree or shrub).

(5) Gateways mark the transition into a garden. They can be as simple as a few branches, or elaborately built with great artistry and substantial doors. Their purpose is to define the inner space from that outside—the sacrosanct from the ordinary, that with purpose and intent from that without.

(6) Walls are also an important part of the garden. They define and enclose the space of the garden, providing in many cases a sense of intimacy. They also serve as a stopping point for the mind and the eye. Walls are usually quite substantial, with three main parts. The lower foundation is often made of natural rock. The main face is made of a wide variety of materials, from mud, to stucco, to glazed tile. Sometimes two facing materials will be used in combination. The roof is often made of tiles, which protects the facing materials, but also completes this substantial enclosure.

(7) Bridges are designed in great variety. They are functional additions to assist one in crossing water, or suggested water. However, the most important function of the bridge is to enhance the journey through the garden, to take one beyond the current location, and to punctuate the experience. Bridges also often focus one's attention on a specific element of the garden, or provide a new and dramatic view of the garden as a whole.

(8) The garden is a communication. It tells who you are. Symbolism is replete in Japanese gardens. Some reflects cultural values and ancient beliefs—tortoise and crane islands, bamboo, pine and plums are signs of longevity, good luck and courage. In many gardens there is a deeper meaning. Examples in

clude the abstract, meditative stone garden at Ryoanji. The bold and brash rock garden created at Nijo Castle in Kyoto was created by Tokugawa as an expression of his powerful political control of the nation. The tea garden, is a total separation from the real world, where one becomes totally focused on the immediate, striving for total involvement with the process of tea, and the beauty of the artifacts assembled to make it, in full equality with other guests. What is it you want your garden to express to its visitor?

If you carefully evaluate your garden, using the criteria discussed, you may find there are opportunities for refinement. You may find your garden can become more peaceful, more inviting, more evocative, and more focused, and that the satisfaction you gain from it multiplies many times over. It is worth a little mental exercise the next time you take a break. Give it a try!

Frank Robinson is the Executive Director of the Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens in Richmond, VA. He is the former Executive Director of the American Horticultural Society. He has a degree in Japanese studies and has spent time in Japan.