

Japanese gardens seek to recreate or represent nature on a microcosmic scale. The art of Japanese gardening has developed over centuries and involves distinct concepts, elements, and techniques. The Japanese term for garden is *niwa*, meaning “pure place.” By providing a peaceful sanctuary for visitors, these gardens often inspire feelings of serenity and harmony.

Early History of the Japanese Garden

The tradition known as Japanese gardening began in China and dates to at least the 1st century BC. Gardens representing landscapes in Chinese legends became fashionable during the Han Dynasty. These early gardens used ponds to symbolize the sea and hills to symbolize islands. The art spread to Japan during the 7th century AD when priests and members of the nobility travelled between Japan, Korea, and China. In Japan the first recorded garden was established in 606. This garden used artificial hills to represent Mount Sumeru, the mythical mountain of the Buddhist universe.

Styles of Japanese Gardens

Three main styles of Japanese garden eventually developed—hill-and-pond, dry landscape, and the tea garden. The hill-and-pond garden is the original style that began in China. Water, stones, evergreen plants, bridges, and paths are frequently found in hill-and-pond gardens. Dry landscape gardens, sometimes called flat gardens, are considered the most abstract. Usually simple and small, they are characterized by white sand, raked gravel, and pebbles artistically arranged to represent nature. Tea gardens are rustic and intimate with sparse plantings. They typically feature a path of stepping stones leading to an enclosed inner garden or tea house. Japanese gardens can range in size from several acres to a single square foot.

Religious Influence on Japanese Gardens

Historically, Japanese religious beliefs have influenced the arts, including garden design. According to Shinto, natural objects such as mountains, rivers, and rocks are inhabited by spirits called *kami*. Traditionally, the garden became a place to worship these nature spirits. Retaining some measure of this religious influence, modern Japanese gardens approach nature as an ideal of beauty to be revered, not subjugated. Zen Buddhism later inspired the design of gardens for contemplative or meditative practices. Zen principles are reflected in Japanese gardens through the use of asymmetry, simplicity, and subtlety.

Basic Concepts of the Japanese Garden

Japanese gardens purposefully incorporate concepts such as space, enclosure, change, and time. Space, or emptiness, serves to define the surrounding forms. Simultaneously the surrounding forms define the emptiness. Fences and gates create enclosure by separating the pure place of the garden from the outside world. The concept of change is built into a garden by varying textures and colors; light and dark; what is flowing and what is stable. Time is acknowledged by using sunlight to feature certain elements throughout the day and night, or with the sound of water. Japanese gardens are also designed to feature the unique time of each season, and they are meant to be viewed year-round.

Main Elements of the Japanese Garden

Japanese gardens are typically constructed from three main elements—stone, water, and plants—but fire may also appear in the form of lanterns. Stones and boulders are the foundation of the garden. They are carefully chosen based on shape, slope, texture, color, and appearance. They stand alone or are arranged in groups, and may represent landscape features such as mountains or islands. Water symbolizes purity. It appears in the form of ponds, waterfalls, or streams. Water is also included in dry landscape gardens, where ponds are represented by raked gravel and smooth river stones laid tightly together can symbolize a stream.

Plants and flowers are chosen based on size, color, form, and texture. Native trees, shrubs, and perennials are considered more appropriate than exotic plants. In the gardens of Japan it is common to find pines, cherries, maples, bamboo, and bonsai. While aesthetic qualities play a role in plant selection, flowers are never used as decoration alone. Paths and bridges are often found in Japanese gardens. Paths symbolize the journey through life and can be formed with gravel or stepping stones and curves offer opportunities for viewing, reflection, and meditation. Bridges over streams or ponds are usually made of stone or wood. People are also considered part of the Japanese garden. Their role is to observe.