

# GARDENS

A unique integration of elements to create beauty



Japanese garden  
(Photo courtesy of  
AFLO)

## Characteristics of Japanese Gardens

In addition to trees and shrubs, the Japanese garden makes artistic use of rocks, sand, artificial hills, ponds, and flowing water. In contrast to the geometrically arranged trees and rocks of a Western-style garden, the Japanese garden traditionally creates a scenic composition that, as artlessly as possible, mimics nature.

Garden designers followed three basic principles when composing scenes. They are reduced scale, symbolization, and “borrowed views.” The first refers to the miniaturization of natural views of mountains and rivers so as to reunite them in a confined area. This could

mean the creation of idealized scenes of a mountain village, even within a city. Symbolization involves abstraction, an example being the use of white sand to suggest the sea. Designers “borrowed views” when they used background views that were outside and beyond the garden, such as a mountain or the ocean, and had them become an integral part of the scenic composition.

The basic framework of the Japanese garden, according to one school of thought, is provided by rocks and the way they are grouped. Ancient Japanese believed that a place surrounded by rocks was inhabited by gods, thus naming it *amatsu iwasaka* (heavenly barrier) or *amatsu iwakura* (heavenly seat). Likewise, a dense cluster of

trees was called *himorogi* (divine hedge); moats and streams, thought to enclose sacred ground, were referred to as *mizugaki* (water fences).

Japanese gardens can be classified into two general types: the *tsukiyama* (hill garden), which is composed of hills and ponds, and the *hiraniwa* (flat garden), a flat area without hills and ponds. At first, it was common to employ the hill style for the main garden of a mansion and the flat style for limited spaces. The latter type, however, became more popular with the introduction of the tea ceremony and the *chashitsu* (tea-ceremony room).

## Gardens in Ancient Times

The earliest known gardens date back to the Asuka period (593–710) and the Nara period (710–794). In the Yamato area (now in Nara Prefecture), designers of imperial family gardens and those of powerful clans created imitations of ocean scenes that featured large ponds dotted with islands and skirted by “seashores.” It was at this time that Buddhism was brought to Japan from the continent by way of the Korean peninsula. Immigrants from there added continental influences to Japanese gardens, such as stone fountains and bridges of Chinese origin.

## Gardens of the *Shinden-zukuri* Style

The capital of the Japanese state was moved from Nara to Kyoto in 794, and the Heian period (794–1185) began. As the noble family of Fujiwara consolidated its grip on power, an aristocratic, natively inspired art and culture developed. These aristocrats lived in luxurious mansions built in the *shinden-zukuri* style. The gardens of this age were also magnificent.

Several rivers came together in Kyoto, and channels were dug to let water flow through various parts of the city. Summers in Kyoto are hot and humid, so people fashioned ponds and waterfalls in order to bring a sense of coolness. Streams called *yarimizu* were made to flow between buildings and through the gardens of mansions. In this *funa asobi* (pleasure boat) style, the often oval-shaped ponds were large enough to allow boating; and fishing was made convenient by putting up fishing pavilions that projected out over the water and were connected by covered corridors to the mansion’s other structures. Between the main buildings and the pond was an extensive area covered with white sand, a picturesque site for the holding of formal ceremonies.

Another style of garden, the *shuyu* (stroll) style, had a path that allowed strollers to proceed from one vantage point to another, enjoying a different view from each one. Such gardens were frequently found in temples and grand houses in the Heian, Kamakura, and Muromachi periods. The garden of the Saihoji temple in Kyoto, laid out by the priest Muso Soseki in the Muromachi period, is well known as a typical “stroll” garden. It is designed to give the impression that the pond blends naturally with the mountain in the background.

## Jodo-Style Gardens

In the tenth century Japan’s aristocracy became increasingly devoted in its practice of Buddhism. As faith in the concept of a paradise known as Jodo (Pure Land) spread, the garden came to be modeled on images of Jodo as described in scripture and religious tracts. It represented a crystallization of some extremely ancient Japanese garden motifs. In this type of garden, the focal point is the pond, with an arched bridge reaching to a central island. The garden of the Byodoin, a temple at Uji (near Kyoto), is a good example of the

Jodo-style garden. This temple was originally the country home of a powerful man of the time, Fujiwara no Michinaga. Because elite members of society took great interest in gardens, they are the subject of numerous excellent critical works, the oldest being *Sakuteiki* (Treatise on Garden Making).

## Gardens of the Zen Sect

The Kamakura period (ca. 1185–1333) that followed saw the rise of a warrior class and the influence of Zen priests from China, bringing about changes in the style of residential buildings and gardens. It was not the custom of the military elite to hold splendid ceremonies in their gardens. Instead, they preferred to enjoy their gardens from inside the house, and gardens were designed to be appreciated primarily for their visual appeal. In this period, priest-designers, or *ishitateso* (literally, rock-placing monks), came to the fore.

It is said that the golden age of Japanese gardens occurred in the Muromachi period (1338–1573). Groups of skilled craftsmen called *senzui kawaramono* (mountain, stream,

and riverbed people) were responsible for creating a new style of garden, known as *karesansui* (dry mountain stream). Heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism, these gardens are characterized by extreme abstraction: groups of rocks represent mountains or waterfalls, and white sand is used to replace flowing water. This form of garden, not seen in any other part of the world, was probably influenced by Chinese ink-painted landscapes of barren mountains and dry riverbeds. Examples include the rock gardens at the temples of Ryoanji and Daitokuji, both in Kyoto. The former, created with just 15 rocks and white sand on a flat piece of ground, is also typical of flat-style gardens.

In addition, gardens of this period received much influence from the style of architecture known as *shoin-zukuri*, which included the *tokonoma* (alcove), *chigaidana* (staggered shelves), and *fusuma* (paper sliding doors), and still serves as the prototype for today's traditional-style Japanese house. In this *kansho* or *zakan* (contemplation) style, the viewer is situated in a *shoin*, a room in a *shoin-zukuri* building, and the view is composed so as to resemble a picture that, like a fine painting, invites careful and extended viewing.

### Ryoanji (Kyoto)

The temple's celebrated Zen-style dry landscape garden is surrounded by a low wall on three sides and consists only of 15 oddly shaped rocks, of varying sizes, placed on a bed of white gravel. (Photo courtesy of Ryoanji)



## The Tea Garden

The tea garden, imbued with a quiet spirituality, was developed in conjunction with the tea ceremony, as taught by Sen no Rikyu (1522–1591). It was through the tea garden, which avoided artificiality and was created so as to retain a highly natural appearance, that one approached the teahouse. Today's Japanese garden incorporates a number of elements inherited from the tea garden, such as stepping stones, stone lanterns, and clusters of trees. The simply designed gazebos in which guests are served tea also have their origin in the tea garden.

## Kaiyu-Style Gardens

The various forms that gardens took on over the centuries were synthesized in the Edo period (1603–1867) in *kaiyu* (many-pleasure) gardens, which were created for feudal lords. Superb stones and trees were used to create miniature reproductions of famous scenes. People walked from one small garden to another, appreciating the ponds in the center. The garden of the Katsura Detached Palace in Kyoto, a creation of the early Edo period, is a typical *kaiyu*-style garden, with a pond in the center and several teahouses surrounding it. This garden came to the attention of a wide audience through the writings of German architect Bruno Taut. Another famous garden in Kyoto is the Kyoto Imperial Palace Garden. Constructed in the seventeenth century, it is called Oikeniwa, which means “Pond Garden.” A large pond dotted with several pine-clad islets occupies most of the garden.

The Korakuen Garden, laid out in 1629, is one of the most magnificent *kaiyu*-style gardens in Tokyo. The lake in the garden has an island with a small temple dedicated to Benzaiten, originally an Indian goddess

known in Japan as one of the Seven Deities of Good Luck. The stone bridge to the island is called the Full-Moon Bridge because of its half-circle shape. The reflection of the bridge on the water completes a circle. The Hama Detached Palace Garden is another famous *kaiyu* garden in Tokyo. The most celebrated view of the garden, which was constructed in the Edo period, is of a lovely tidal pond spanned by three bridges. Each bridge is shaded by wisteria-vine trellises and leads to an islet. The layout of the ponds, lawns, and riding grounds creates the atmosphere of a villa maintained by a feudal lord in the Edo period.

The so-called three most beautiful landscape gardens in Japan—Kairakuen at Mito, Ibaraki Prefecture; Kenrokuen at Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture; and Korakuen at Okayama, Okayama Prefecture—are also of this type.

Beginning in the Meiji period (1868–1912), the influence of the West began to extend even to traditional Japanese garden design, such as incorporating large-scale spaces with extensive lawns. Tokyo’s Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden is one example.



**Kenrokuen in Ishikawa Prefecture**  
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)