



Beyond Japan - Gardening in the Desert

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As new arrivals to the southwest soon discover, gardening is different here, and often represents a novel and unfamiliar challenge. Our English gardening roots have left us with many old assumptions which simply don't work in this new environment. It's less green, more rugged, and the conditions of sunlight, soil and dryness are more intense. The vastness of the sky and the grandeur of the mountains loom large over our little patch of paradise.

As unlikely as it might seem, the challenge of making gardens in the desert and the materials we work with here resonate strongly with another distant and ancient gardening tradition. It's no secret that gardeners and landscape designers who have an affinity for the natural beauty of the arid southwest often find themselves drawn to the sensibilities of the Japanese garden. In fact, when it comes to a certain spirit and style, it's not all that far from New Mexico to Japan.

What the southwestern landscape and the Japanese garden share is an emphasis on the direct experience of things as they are in nature. When visiting the classic Zen landscapes in Kyoto, the westerner's first reaction is often "Where are the flowers?" The answer, of course, is that there aren't any. Instead, Japanese gardens put the emphasis on the forms of nature - rocks, shrubs, trees, dry water features and understated structures - and not on masses of blooming perennials and annuals. Where "Western" gardens are virtually defined by displays of ever changing color, the prominence of organic materials like big stones, sculptural shrubs and trees, streambeds of dry gravel or sand, flagstone pathways and the play of sun and shadow are more central to the Japanese garden. Additionally, a Japanese garden doesn't change as rapidly as an English garden does when it's marching through the seasons. Time passes slowly there. But, just like the desert in spring, occasionally there is a sudden dramatic surprise. When a particular fruit tree or shrub bursts into bloom, the effect can be startling, as if a familiar sculpture has suddenly covered itself with colorful flowers.

The hallmarks of the Japanese garden are true for southwestern landscapes as well. Oriental notions blend seamlessly into the emerging landscape paradigms known variously as xeriscaping, permaculture or, more simply, as "regional style". Each approach has its own special focus, but all center around the use of plants and materials that are either endemic or adapted to the local conditions, recreating a sense of the immediate surrounding environment and harmonizing with the prevailing climate of sun, water and soil. By featuring natural stones, dry arroyos, and using native trees and shrubs along with dramatically-shaped plants like agave, yucca, or grasses, our desert gardens begin to echo the Japanese style.

Though it is possible, making a traditional Japanese garden here in the desert should not be our goal. Rather, we should seek to reinterpret the spirit of the oriental garden in our own local context. This spirit embraces the notion of creating a private, secluded refuge which simultaneously connects us with the larger outside environment. We can

take a cue from the idea of consciously making unadorned natural objects be more of a theme.

What's more exciting, our gardens are poised to evolve beyond the Japanese prescription into a different kind of garden, which successfully combines the Zen-like gravitas and quiet grace of the sculptural elements with the exuberant, quirky colors and shapes of the desert. These "fusion gardens" as they are sometimes called, are something new, neither east nor west. They tap into the strengths of both, combining our British-bred love of colorful flowers with the oriental emphasis on the informal and organic. Anyone who has ever seen the desert bloom after a wet spring has experienced just this juxtaposition of the harsh and the lush. Annual wildflowers, strategically placed rock gardens, cacti, and the select use of drought-adapted perennials all allow us to recreate this ephemeral glory in our own little oases. Here, "traditional" elements such as turf lawns, geometric flower beds and containers are snuggled up near the house in a small intimate space or are omitted altogether. Water is frequently presented in the guise of a demure murmuring spring, a modest fountain, or better yet, simply suggested with a wash of sand and gravel in a dry streambed, to come and go with the summer storms.

All gardening takes patience, of course, and a willingness to participate in a certain kind of humility. It is always a process of trial and error. The garden will tell us when we have the right plants in the right place and if the rocks and trees sit comfortably where we've put them. In this sense, the garden is much like an Alexander Calder mobile — if we have placed all the parts in just the right relation, "Viola": it sings. It's a sort of *feng-shui*. More often than not, these gardens are quiet, subtle, and contemplative. The Japanese garden is akin to a shrine or a sacred space. Overall, there is a sense of reverence for nature and an absence of the artificial. The garden synchronizes with and amplifies the momentary and seasonal changes of the landscape from which it is made. Learning to blend and flow with nature in this way can result in a kind of aesthetic harmony and peacefulness which reminds us of our connection to the beauty and rhythm of the world around us — and isn't that a wonderful thing for a garden to do?

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