

Japanese Gardens Today: Challenges

Japanese Gardens today face endless challenges. Like any garden, a Japanese garden grows and changes daily, requiring constant vigilance and maintenance. Unlike most other gardens, Japanese gardens demand that those who care for them adhere to age-old traditions that require very special knowledge and skills to uphold. They are expensive to maintain properly and we are in an era of diminishing resources leading to the failure or demise of many cultural and other related institutions.

Let's explore the many challenges facing Japanese gardens in more depth. The challenges can be boiled down to:

- Maintaining quality
- Maintaining authenticity
- Loss of funding
- Staff training
- Reaching and Building audience

Maintaining Quality

Japanese gardens by their very nature exemplify quality. Whether designed and built by renowned Japanese garden experts or by local talent, with few exceptions, Japanese gardens were built with great care and craftsmanship. Skillful, thoughtful people have put their hearts into making beautiful, meaningful gardens.

It is rarely the case, however, that the original designers/builders of gardens continue to maintain them over the years. Of course, even where it is the case, it is for a limited time only, and the desire is for the garden to last long past that period of time. Thus, every garden is faced with the challenge of maintaining or sometimes improving the quality level at which it was created.

Doing so requires vision, passion, skills and resources. It also requires that these be passed on from caretaker to caretaker, generation to generation. As we all know, it takes no time for a garden to grow in entirely new directions if it is not maintained properly. The first garden at the Morikami Museum where I worked for 28 years changed almost imperceptibly over short periods, but over 20 years, black olive trees grew out of proportion, shorelines eroded, new pathways emerged, and plant materials lost their shape and character. It looked nothing like what designer Seishiro Tomioka had intended.



Maintaining Authenticity

What do I mean by authenticity? In the case of Japanese gardens, I am referring to three elements:

- Designer's intent
- Technical/aesthetic qualities
- Interpretation

How did the designer of the garden intend for it to develop? In most cases, s/he intends for the water bodies, stone backbone, and land contours to remain the same. But what about the plant materials? Did he envision young trees to grow to their full, natural height or to be kept to 7 feet, 12 feet, 20 feet? Were shrubs planned to be allowed to grow to a specific height, width, and depth, and to be trimmed in a rounded or squared fashion? What overall shape or pattern was intended for a grouping of trees, shrubs, rocks, ground covers and, perhaps, a stone lantern to develop into? Ten or twenty or a hundred years later, does the garden appear exactly or largely as the designer intended? Do we even know what he intended? Is it documented in plans and sketches or in writing?

Does the garden evince a high level of technical skills in the pruning of pines, setting of stones, construction of fences, etc.? Are shrubs maintained in the appropriate sizes and shapes? Have plants or fences and bridges been replaced or repaired in an inferior manner? Is the garden kept clean and tidy? Or is it evident that shortcuts have been taken, or there simply is no one with the appropriate skills? Has there been an overall loss of quality?

How is the garden interpreted for visitors? Is there any signage, a brochure, or someone to guide visitors or answer questions? Is the information presented accurate or does it include myth and misinterpretation of Japanese history or tradition?

Loss of Funding

Very few Japanese gardens have been adequately funded over the years and today conditions are considerably worse than in the past. With the ongoing economic downturns in Japan, the United States and elsewhere, financial resources have become increasingly difficult to acquire.

Local and state government tax revenues have continued to drop, requiring those governments to make difficult choices about where to spend their reduced resources. In Florida, the 4th largest state, for example, support for cultural organizations of all types has been chopped from tens of \$ millions to less than \$1 million in recent years. City and county governments have followed much the same pattern. When was the last time – if there ever was one – when funding for a Japanese garden was deemed as important as support for schools, health care, law enforcement, etc.?

Corporate support, never the primary support for nonprofit organizations, has diminished considerably. At the same time, what corporate funding exists is no longer philanthropic in nature, but almost entirely predicated on the corporation's marketing goals. Nonprofits, including Japanese gardens, have to demonstrate to their corporate partners how much value they are providing to the corporation in return for its support. Japanese companies, some of which have been generous sponsors of Japanese gardens abroad, have closed offices and cut back or eliminated their support in many areas in recent years.

Finally, the economic downturn has diminished the resources of most individuals, typically the largest source of support for nonprofits. Even very wealthy people have less to give and formerly consistent donors may have lost their businesses, their jobs or a significant portion of their savings.

Staff Training

For Japanese gardens outside of Japan – and even inside Japan – the demand for skilled garden staff exceeds the supply. With fewer children in Japan eager to take over family gardening businesses and, generally, to seek careers doing manual labor, fewer people are being trained in the traditional manner in the arts of Japanese gardening. Outside Japan it is even worse. There are few such family businesses to begin with and even fewer children interested in carrying them on. Few formal schools offer such training. Getting training in the skills needed to maintain a Japanese garden properly – even when garden managers recognize the need and have the resources to pay for such training - is a huge problem.

Reaching and Building Audience

Although many of us who care deeply about Japanese gardens might selfishly be happy to have 'our' gardens almost to ourselves, any garden that is going to survive, let alone thrive, must have an audience (customers, visitors, patrons). In most cases, Japanese gardens in the modern era have been built to share with new audiences the beauty and the joy that people have experienced through gardens in Japan. Whether run by nonprofits or governments, they typically exist for "the people" and are ultimately supported by "the people."

All around the world, new technologies are changing the ways in which people spend their leisure time. Japanese gardens must compete with computers, iPhones, television, video games, movies, and the like – to say nothing of shopping malls - for audience. We cannot just 'build it and they will come.'

Major challenges face public Japanese gardens in today's world. Each challenge brings with it opportunities to grow and become stronger, more meaningful contributors to the quality of life in our communities.