

Japanese Gardens Today: Opportunities

Challenges and opportunities are like *yin* and *yang*, or *in* and *yo* in Japanese. Every challenge brings with it an opportunity. Japanese gardens face many challenges these days, but new opportunities to become relevant and important to a broader public are everywhere. Among them are these:

- Ascendancy of Spirituality
- Healing Qualities
- Interest in Japanese Culture among Youth
- Interpretive Options, such as cell phone tours
- Demand for Wholesome Family Experiences
- Romance and Memories

Ascendancy of Spirituality

In the wake of the pervasiveness of technology – largely in response to it, in fact – people in advanced countries have been seeking meaning in their lives through spiritual quests. This accounts, in part, for the rise of religious fundamentalism, but it also leads to a greater appreciation of the wonders of nature. For many, a Japanese garden provides a deep-felt connection with nature and an opportunity for spiritual renewal. Of course, many Japanese gardens are intimately associated with religious pursuits, most famously the dry gardens of such Zen Buddhist temples as Ryoanji and Daitokuji. Indeed, the Japanese word for garden (*niwa*) refers to a place for the worship of Shinto spirits.

Healing Qualities

Who doesn't feel better during and after time spent in a Japanese garden? We understand intuitively the therapeutic, healing effects of Japanese gardens. In recent years, however, research on the healing values of gardens in general and Japanese gardens in particular has been undertaken. Following upon designer/builder Hoichi Kurisu's often expressed sentiments about the therapeutic value of the Rojien garden at Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens, the museum undertook a study of clinically diagnosed seniors suffering from mild depression. Not surprisingly, the depressed seniors showed improvement after strolling the gardens.

Interest in Japanese Culture Among Youth

Most Japanese gardens have focused their appeal to mature adults whose interest often stems from experiences in Japan or with gardening or *bonsai*. Young people today often have an entirely different connection with Japanese culture – through *manga* (comics) and *anime* (animated films), martial arts, *taiko* drumming, etc. They are fascinated with Japan and seek out authentic representations of the culture they see and read about. If Japanese gardens are to cultivate the interest and support of upcoming generations, they must find ways to make themselves relevant to these young Japanophiles.



Interpretive Options

Most Westerners want to understand what they are experiencing. How people arrive at an understanding varies enormously. Contemporary learning theory suggests that people learn in individual ways. Some are visual learners, others auditory, and others learn best through action. Some want to take in the sights, smells and textures of the garden without any interpretive filter. Others have a question they need to have answered at every turn; still others want to read deeply before they experience anything first-hand. An interpretive technique that one person might deem essential, say signage, might be intrusive and offensive to another visitor.

Fortunately, technology offers us many options to meet visitors' need to know and learn. Even better, it allows their use with little, if any, intrusion on others. Websites can contain downloadable information, from maps to scholarly articles about gardens. Cell phone tours are a cheap and effective way to offer audio interpretation without either a human guide or expensive equipment. iPhones and similar equipment can even use GPS to identify elements as small as an individual tree or stone lantern within a garden. And who knows what tomorrow will bring?

Family Experiences

The notion of 'quality time,' among other things, has led to an increase in family outings and experiences, whether in multi-generational groups, nuclear families, Dads or Moms with weekend custody of kids. Japanese gardens can be wonderful places for these family outings, especially if they are welcomed and offered appropriate programming.

Too often the message families perceive from Japanese gardens is that children are barely tolerated and only insofar as they don't touch anything or stray off a path. Using words that encourage young children to behave reasonably while still being kids can make the difference between disgruntled or satisfied customers and potential future supporters. Such gardens as Portland, Fort Worth and Morikami use festivals – Children's Day, for example – to attract and educate families.

Don't forget families of adult children and their senior citizen parents, including persons with limited mobility. In South Florida, very often the family groupings seen at the Morikami consist of grandparent(s) and grandchildren, elderly parent and middle-aged child, or multi-generational families.

Romance

Beauty and romance go hand in hand. One often hears people talk about a wonderful date at a Japanese garden, to say nothing of the popularity of many Japanese gardens as wedding sites. I may be biased because I met my wife and married her at the Morikami, but I can't think of a more romantic place.

The Morikami today does a booming business in Special Events, including weddings, ranging from photography to wedding ceremonies to full-fledged wedding receptions. The revenues are significant. Not every Japanese garden is set up – or desires – to serve as the site for weddings, but there are few if any that should not serve as a venue for young – or even older – lovers to meet and enjoy themselves. Think of the lifetime commitment to the place where a couple met or married and the generations to come that may see photographs of the happy couple in the garden and want to visit and/or support it themselves.