

Elements of Japanese Gardens

Seisui-Tei, “Garden of Pure Water”, is a traditional Zen garden where the essence of nature is created through suggestion and association, incorporating many elements into the landscape. These elements are not meant to be symbols, rather they are meant to be evocative. That is, the elements of the garden are meant to evoke one’s creative process and invite one’s imagination to enhance the experience of beauty in the garden.

The total effect of the garden is effortlessly lead the visitor from one point of interest to another. However, the garden also incorporates the idea of “reveal and conceal”, in which one does not see everything at once, so that each time one changes their direction or vision, they see something new. Each sitting space, each direction has a pleasing and different view, adding to the allure of the garden.

Within the garden there are elements of enclosure and expansion. A Japanese Garden is about borrowed scenery, the garden is nestled in a corner of the Arboretum property with mature trees surrounding it, putting it into a vista to expand the view and make boundaries disappear.

The rocks and stones within the garden are the bones of the whole garden and set the atmosphere within the garden. The stones must be solid, heavy rocks. The rocks should reflect the area, in that, they must be regional- at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, the rocks are from Dresser, Wisconsin. The sidewalk itself, the gravel and set stones, are attractive and encourage visitors to walk slowly. The staggered stones on the path by the waterfall encourage one to slow down, because even if one stops to look for only three seconds at where they are stepping, they have forgotten whatever they were thinking about, whatever stress they may have, and for those three seconds one’s mind has come to the present and the garden is foremost in mind.

Basins, towers, and lanterns are also essential fixtures in Japanese gardens and can be found in our garden. The lantern is made of stone and gives a sense of balance and stability as well as being used as a way to guide visitors through the garden. The stone towers located in the garden were once used to add a spiritual element to gardens, but today are used as decorative elements. The basin near the teahouse is a necessary element for tea ceremonies since it is required to purify the body and mind by rinsing one’s mouth and hands in the basin before participating in the tea ceremony.

Look for other elements that exist within the garden. What do they symbolize for you?

The water and pond can symbolize the ocean.

The large stone between the waterfall and the island symbolizes good fortune or a ship?

The island, unreachable and often a place of beauty can evoke heaven. When shaped like a tortoise, which symbolizes longevity in Asian culture, more meaning is added.

A stone at the base of the waterfall is a vertical stone which symbolizes a carp trying to swim up the waterfall to represent power and strength and transformation.

As you walk through the garden try to use all of your senses to encourage your own imagination as a means to enhance your own experience of beauty in the garden – what do the different elements evoke to you? The best experience here is one of lingering and resting, taking in the beauty of the space and leaving with a sense of renewal and peace that comes from our close experiences with nature.