



Botanical Garden Programs: Japanese Garden

ZEN GARDENS:

Design Elements and Symbolism in the Huntington Japanese Garden



Grades 4–7

I. Introduction

In preparation for a school visit to the Huntington Botanical Gardens' Japanese Garden tour, we will explore symbolism and design concepts in Japanese gardens through the creation of a small model of a Zen Garden.

II. Objective

- ◆ To encourage inquiry into the design elements and symbolism of Japanese gardens through a hands-on lesson in Zen Garden design.

III. Background

The Japanese Garden at the Huntington is comprised of three parts: a stroll garden with a traditional house, a Zen-style garden with a bonsai court, and an informal planting of Asian plants. While the Huntington Japanese Garden is a Western 20th century interpretation of 10th century Japanese gardens, many parallels and symbolic elements can be seen and studied. Most of the structures and sculpture at The Huntington are Japanese in origin or design.

The tranquility of Japanese gardens is often attributed to the dominance of the color green, with seasonal colors accenting the beauty of a slowly changing space. The stroll garden is designed to create and frame views as one walks through the garden. The use of open space is very important in Japanese gardens, and the open spaces are planned and considered as an integral part of the garden design. The Japanese garden is also thoughtfully planted with trees, shrubs, and flowers that hold symbolic significance in Japan. For example, pine needles stay green all year and grow in pairs, therefore they represent devotion and longevity. Plum blossoms appear early every year, as harbingers of spring and symbols of courage and womanhood.

The Zen Garden at the Huntington is surrounded by walls, which enclose a space designed for contemplation. Dry raked gravel, a few stones, and background shrubs make a stylized reference to islands in a moving stream. Opposite the raked gravel are ginkgo trees among mondo grass, evoking a forest.

IV. **Materials Needed** (for each group of 3 students)

- ◆ tray for garden model
- ◆ potting soil
- ◆ gravel
- ◆ small rocks of assorted shapes and sizes
- ◆ dwarf mondo grass
- ◆ other small plants and moss

V. **Lesson Activities**

1. Preparation

- a) Guide your students through a discussion of symbolism and nature. Discuss how design elements in Japanese gardens create different moods and spaces that are often very different from traditional European flower gardens. It is also interesting to discuss the symbolism of different plants and to compare them with familiar examples of symbolism in our culture.
- b) Each student will have a tray and a selection of materials for their model Zen Garden. Begin by discussing the mood that they would like to evoke with their model gardens. Have the students draw plans of their garden, focusing on shapes that can evoke scenes from nature.

2. Procedure

- a) Organize and plan the supplies that you will use. Choose gravel, rocks, soil, and plants that you would like to use in your model. You may also want to incorporate water into your design. When creating your Zen Garden think about these three themes: space, simplicity, and imagination.
- b) Fill the bottom of the tray with soil.
- c) Take the time to examine the soil you will use. This is a good time to discuss the care and needs of the plants you will be planting in your model.
- d) Examine and discuss the plants you will be putting in the Zen Garden model.
- e) Arrange and plant the chosen plants. When transplanting, gently remove the plants from their old containers, taking care not to damage their roots. Dig a small hole where you will plant them, then place the roots in the ground and cover them with soil.

- f) Place the gravel over the soil in your tray. Add rocks as islands or other symbols from nature. They are sometimes thought to represent mountains or animals. (Optional: try raking the gravel into patterns. It is often combed into long, straight rows, waves, scallop shapes, or circles around one or more rocks. You can try using forks or chopsticks to achieve this effect.)
- g) Find a location for your Zen Garden in filtered sunlight. Check your Zen Garden periodically, watering the plants, and contemplating the space you have created.

VI. Discussion Questions

1. What are design elements? (Discuss the meaning and uses of space, balance, asymmetry, rhythm and color in Japanese gardens.)
2. What is symbolism?
3. How can symbols be represented by plants and gardens?
4. What is a Zen Garden?
5. How can you create a space for contemplation using rocks and plants?

VII. Extension Questions

1. How would you compare Japanese gardens to other gardens you've seen?
2. How does the Japanese garden make you feel?
3. Do all spaces generate particular moods?
4. How do you feel when you are in different environments? Downtown? In a park? A forest?
5. Do you associate any emotions or qualities with particular plants?
6. What other kinds of symbols can you think of in your life? In our culture?

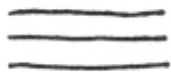
ZEN GARDENS
“Gardens of the Mind”

A tradition going back as far as 3000 B.C.

For centuries, Japanese Zen Masters have created gardens of carefully arranged rocks, raked gravel and space. These gardens depict scenes of nature and are “framed”, as if to capture a small piece of the universe.

These rock gardens are also called “Gardens of the Mind” because they are silent, peaceful places where you can go, to think clearly about life, nature and one’s own inner strength. They are never to be walked on, only looked at and respected.

The traditional Zen Garden will have a rectangle frame filled with flat, raked gravel (usually gray or white). The gravel is combed in: long, perfectly straight rows, wavy patterns,



scallop shapes or circles around one or more rocks.



When creating your Zen Garden remember:

- *SPACE
- *SIMPLICITY
- *IMAGINATION

You may use any rocks that you wish, but look for rocks that remind you of something found in nature:

MOUNTAINS, ISLANDS, WATERFALLS, ANIMALS . . .

Choose several rocks but remember to leave plenty of SPACE.

We hope that the experience of making your own Zen Garden has given you a deeper respect & appreciation of this ancient tradition.

JUST LOOK AND BEGIN TO SEE THINGS IN A NEW WAY