The Japanese Garden at Washington Park Arboretum was designed as a stroll garden, a style that dates from the early years of Japan’s Edo period (1603–1868). Large in scale and created for enjoyment, the stroll garden features a central pond surrounded by a meandering path and often incorporates a teahouse. The modern Japanese term for it is kaiyūshiki teien, translated as “excursion-style garden.”

Various garden styles preceded it. Large hill-and-pond gardens (sansui) were built by the Japanese aristocracy from the 8th to the 11th centuries. Viewed from pleasure boats and large buildings, these included large ponds and high hills, created to represent oceans and mountains.

The 13th century and the rise of Zen Buddhism saw the development of austere, relatively small hardscape gardens (kare-sansui) consisting of stones, raked gravel, and few or no plants. Sometimes called “Zen gardens,” these dry-landscape displays were designed for contemplation and meditation. Visitors viewed them from an adjoining veranda instead of experiencing them from within.
THE TEA GARDEN
In the Momoyama period (1573–1603), tea master Sen no Rikyu refined the tea ceremony into a ritual of harmony, respect, purity and tranquility known as chado, “the Way of Tea.” Matcha tea, a green powder whisked into hot water, had been brought from China to Japan in the late 12th century. Initially used in religious rituals, it later became associated with extravagant parties. By the late 16th century, however, the tea ceremony had been distilled into a ritual defined by the Zen aesthetic of wabi-sabi, which found beauty in quiet humility, rustic simplicity, imperfection and change—and even in the processes of aging and decay.

Simple in design and materials, the tea garden (roji)—and the teahouse itself—embodies this aesthetic. The tea garden is an enclosed space with restrained plantings (primarily evergreens) and moss covering the ground. A stepping-stone path, representing a mountain trail, leads to the teahouse. Before the tea ceremony begins, the tea master sprinkles water over the garden—hence the word roji, which means “dewy path.”

Guests move through outer and inner gardens to the teahouse, leaving behind the everyday world to participate in the ceremony’s spiritual and ethical essence.

THE STROLL GARDEN
Stroll gardens were built beginning in the early 1600s, during a period of peace and prosperity. Like tea gardens, they were designed to be experienced from within. Although travel during that time was greatly restricted, nobles and provincial lords (daimyo) owned large properties and were permitted to design their own gardens. Reflecting their owners’ interest in aesthetics rather than religion, these gardens were magnificent, more colorful than earlier styles, and created for enjoyment. They were designed to be experienced as journeys past scenes from nature, literature and art. Most contained or evolved from the much smaller tea garden—a core of simplicity within the garden’s splendor.

In the stroll garden, visitors walk slowly past a succession of views and landscape elements, including those characteristic of earlier...
styles—ponds, streams, waterfalls, islands, lanterns, stepping-stones, bridges, teahouses and other structures. It has been described as “a sequential garden whose almost limitless succession of views was revealed through movement...like a great drama whose scenes unfolded only through time.”

It has also been described as a kind of “mute music, with its own special rhythms and variations.”

OUR SEATTLE JAPANESE GARDEN
Our garden’s design was a gift from the Tokyo Metropolitan Green Spaces Division. Renowned landscape architect Jūki Iida was chosen to supervise its construction. In all, seven Japanese designers—including Iida and Kiyoshi Inoshita, who produced the original design concept—collaborated to develop detailed plans. Charged with developing an authentic Japanese garden outside of Japan, they described their design as having been influenced by several notable Japanese stroll gardens—including the earliest one extant, Katsura Imperial Villa (Katsura Rikyu).

Iida’s contribution to the design was the naturalistic and informal southern section of the Garden, especially the wooded mountain area with its waterfall, cascade, and plantings of mixed deciduous and evergreen trees. The Garden’s more formal northern area, including the fishing village and wisteria arbor, was likely designed by Inoshita.

The most powerful design device used in stroll gardens is arguably the garden path, which winds past various landscape elements and vistas. In the Seattle Japanese Garden, we journey through the varied landscapes of Japan—mountains, forests, waterfalls, rivers, islands and the sea. Our experience is shaped by the aesthetic principle of mie gakure (usually translated as “hide and reveal”), which ensures that we experience the garden sequentially rather than all at once. Along the way, we encounter the water, stones, plants, animals and structures common to many Japanese garden styles. The elements and viewpoints are concealed and then gradually revealed.

VARIED LANDSCAPES OF OUR GARDEN
As we pass through the Garden’s southern courtyard and entry gate, we enter an area of mixed
forest. Plants native to Japan—such as pines, maples, camellias, bamboo and moss—predominate, but Pacific Northwest native plants are included as well. East of the path is a dry streambed flowing through open woodlands. Where the way forks, we take the eastern path (moving counterclockwise through the Garden) and pass by three tall ginkgo trees. Then, the vista opens to our first expansive view of the Garden and its central pond.

Ahead is the Garden’s original (eastern) entry gate, the central island with its two bridges bisecting the pond, and a moon-viewing platform on the other side. Also revealed is the northern end of the garden, with its port village. On our way there, we pass by the wisteria arbor, where water from the pond flows out of the Garden. The cut-stone dock and paths reveal the formal and human element that characterizes this harbor area.

A seven-foot stone wall behind the village hints of mountain foothills. Above it, a long row of sculpted azalea—a wave of bright-pink flowers in spring—symbolizes ocean waves or mountain ranges. Benches with expansive garden views are backed by a pine-covered slope.

Leaving behind the port village and the garden’s northern end, we pass a densely forested area of broadleaf evergreens before arriving at the azumaya, an open-sided wooden shelter for rest and reflection. Situated at the top of a rise, it provides a beautiful view of the Garden and its orchard of flowering cherry, crabapple and plum. Pausing here, we appreciate the borrowed scenery (shakkei) of the larger Arboretum beyond.

At the pond’s southwestern edge is the roji, a tranquil refuge defined by its many shades of green. A mixed hedge of boxwood, cedar, pieris and evergreen huckleberry surrounds it, pruned in an open style suggestive of the mie gakure aesthetic. Participants in the tea ceremony gather in a small waiting station (machiai) in the outer garden, before being led to the teahouse—a rustic villa known as “Arbor of the Murmuring Pines” (Shoseian). Nearby is the mountain—our Garden’s final and most naturalistic section, and the area most reminiscent of the landscapes of Japan.

Except for its flat, highly populated coastal areas, Japan’s landscape is dominated by rocky, forested mountains and swift streams cascading down from waterfalls. Our own mountain—densely planted with maples and other trees, both deciduous and evergreen—contains a monumental waterfall, its primary stone an eight-ton boulder. Higher up is an eleven-story stone pagoda, symbolizing a mountain monastery. Here, the elements of water, plants and large, moss-covered stones come together to form one of the Garden’s most powerful features.

From the mountain area, we pass downhill to end our journey in the open woodlands of its beginning, where most of the Garden is again hidden from view. Here, and throughout the
Garden, the “hide and reveal” technique helps us to see what is immediately before us, inviting us to experience the space slowly and mindfully. My hope is that each visitor’s journey evolves into a personal dialogue with our unfolding, ever-changing Garden.

**REFERENCES**


Stone is essential to Japanese gardens—arguably more important than any other garden element. Shinto, Japan’s indigenous religion, saw gods (kami) in all of nature, residing in stones as well as plants and animals.

Similarly, visitors to the Seattle Japanese Garden experience the structure, power and energy that stone brings to the landscape. Used both symbolically, and for practical purposes, stones represent mountains, waterfalls, streams, islands and other elements of nature. Important garden ornaments, such as lanterns and an eleven-story tower, are made of stone.

Stones are also essential to the Garden’s construction, maintenance and renovation. Used to create paths and stairs, they also hold back the soil behind the fishing village, and at the edges of the pond. Varying in size, shape, color, texture and use, stones are nonetheless a unifying aesthetic element.

The photo above shows a moss-covered lantern overlooking the pond. Together with the stone it rests upon, it unites water, plant and stone. Yet even this small detail, like the Garden’s monumental waterfall, embodies the beauty and power we experience as we journey through the Garden.

**Corinne Kennedy** is a retired garden designer, Seattle Japanese Garden guide, Elisabeth C. Miller Library volunteer, and member of the “Bulletin” Editorial Board. She’s also a frequent contributor to the Japanese Garden’s blog.