Honoring the Design Intent

Constant Change, Adaptive Maintenance, and the Development of the Plant Collection at the Japanese Garden

By Pete Putnicki

Since its opening 60 years ago, the Seattle Japanese Garden has been a place of connection for many Seattle residents and visitors—a place to connect to community, nature, and the unique, intentional narrative experience that the Garden offers.

A crucial aspect of this Garden is maintenance: painstaking maintenance of both the physical elements (trees, shrubs, rocks and water) and, perhaps more significantly, the original intention of the designers. Both types of maintenance—physical and conceptual—must be responsive and adaptive to the dynamic forces of nature so that, as the Garden ages and
develops, it grows closer to, rather than farther from, its original intention. Only through expressing this intention in place can the Garden achieve real authenticity.

**ORIGINAL ADAPTATIONS**
The original design plans and the early, published descriptions by Jūki Iida provided a solid framework upon which to build our Garden. The distinct regions within the Garden, the representations of natural imagery (such as forest, sea and mountains), and the celebration of natural beauty that inspired the Garden’s creation are still fundamental principles for maintenance and enhancement today.

Adaptation was built into the Garden from day one: The actual, “on-the-ground” construction was adapted to the physical environment from the original concept drawings and plans. From the shape of the pond to the arrangement and layout of the plantings, decisions were made to take advantage of the reality of the Garden space.

In the initial planting, species and specimens were selected based on how available material could be used to communicate the design intention. Asian conifers (such as Japanese red pine, *Pinus densiflora*, and Japanese cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica*) and maples formed the core of the original collection. However, so too did rhododendrons, which are not typically seen in Japanese gardens but were added by Iida due to their prominence in the Pacific Northwest. Likewise, Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and other native plants, including salal (*Gaultheria shallon*) and huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum* and *V. parvifolium*), were used both as analogues for Japanese plants and to tie the Garden to its location.

A keen observer of nature, Jūki Iida let the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest contribute to his vision of the Garden. The site chosen for the Garden was part of the existing Arboretum, and Iida incorporated some existing plant material, further attaching the Garden to its environs.

**EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND REALIGNMENT**
In the early years, small plants grew larger, moss and other ground covers filled in the bare soil, and the Garden began to integrate with the Arboretum growing around it. During this time, the collection was also expanded, and more plants were added or...
removed in response to the growth of the Garden, the interest of visitors, and the shifting missions of the curators. Elements of a botanical collection were incorporated into the framework of the Japanese Garden. As time passed, the form of the Garden began to reflect these changes, and the scale, size and shape of the plant material began to reflect a more Northwest woodland aesthetic.

In 1973, Iida returned to visit and helped establish a program of maintenance to bring the existing Garden closer in alignment with the original design concept. A number of large trees, ground covers and other plants were removed; a significant and painstaking pruning program was instituted; and the emphasis was shifted towards refinement of the Garden.

With the vital help of gardeners and consultants such as Dick Yamasaki, Mark Akai and others, an ongoing lineage of maintenance and enhancement was initiated. Gradually, the Garden began to reflect something more than a flat implementation of the design—it began to develop its own identity and became a true and honest fusion of ideals, images and cultures.

**ENHANCEMENT AND IMPROVEMENT**

The Seattle Japanese Garden is a garden in the present tense: a place that’s living, vital and dynamic.

For example, in the late 1990s, under the guidance of Masa Mizuno (current garden consultant), another significant shift in the plant collection began to take place. Birch, oak, ash, and other large deciduous trees were removed. Individual specimens were slated for removal because their negative impacts outweighed their positive attributes. Trees that were unsuitable for pruning and grooming—and trees that were oversized for the scale of the Garden—were removed.

Trees removed were often “pioneer” species (ones that tend to grow quickly in disturbed or cleared areas)—in other words, trees typical of a “young” forest. For a Garden approaching maturity, these elements were no longer appropriate, in spite of any individual merits. Over the last few years of the twentieth century, a holistic view of the Garden was incorporated into management practice. In essence, each element
needed to fit into and contribute to the overall quality of the Garden.

After the initial round of refinements, the focus shifted to the conifer canopy. Trees that were crowding the composition—or were out of scale or disconnecting the Garden from the borrowed scenery of its surroundings—were assessed for removal. An oversized cryptomeria in the Tea Garden and Alaska cedars (*Cupressus nootkatensis*) by the East Gate are examples of the removals from this era.

At the same time, pruning to emphasize the structures of smaller trees was stepped up, helping to create a feeling of depth not dependent on volume. The thoughtful restoration of negative space helped to make the Garden feel larger, rather than sparser. (Note: The removal of large trees from such a carefully curated space presents a series of technical challenges for our crews and contractors. A great deal of thought, planning, and highly skilled execution goes into all of our decisions around the large tree collection here.)

Ground covers were also changed, moss was encouraged, and the negative space between the ground plane and the tree branches added to the feelings of depth.

As the first decade of the 2000s came to end, the addition of the gatehouse, Tateuchi Community Room, and new entrance plantings added to the growing narrative of the Garden. Hakone grass (*Hakonechloa*) and mondo grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus*, as well as *O. japonicum* ‘Nana’), added texture outside the gate and tied the landscape to the architecture.

**NEW AND FUTURE PLANTINGS**

Nowadays, we select plants for their holistic contribution to the Garden. Recent additions include upright varieties of maples (such as *Acer palmatum* ‘Aconitifolium’), which connect the upper and lower stories and soften the dark, dense appearance of the conifer canopy. They also include osmanthus, such as *Osmanthus fragrans*, to supplement azaleas as low, textural evergreen foundational plantings or replace azaleas growing unhappily in wet, heavy soils.

Conditions in the garden are not static. The removal of some large trees has changed patterns of light and rainfall, as well as the absorption and translocation of groundwater. On a larger scale, weather patterns are changing in ways that are difficult to predict: Groundwater and air quality are affected as our environment becomes more urbanized, and as more and more pests and diseases are being introduced.

Adaptation is a key factor in the selection of new plants. Some species are showing increased susceptibility to pests and diseases (for example, shore pine and flowering cherries), while other species are not thriving in current conditions. As we look for replacements—or for enhancement planting material—we are seeking species for the future.
A recent example is the replacement of two Japanese maples on the east shoreline. For years, these trees have been suffering in the dense, waterlogged soil along the shore. When seeking to address this issue, rather than try to change the Garden for the plants, we changed the plants for the Garden. In their place, we planted weeping varieties of katsura (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum* ‘Morioka’), which is adapted to wet conditions and hopefully will thrive in this area. Moreover, the original plans included a half dozen weeping willows (*Salix babylonica*)—pioneer trees that have almost all been removed. We hope the katsura, though a new addition and adaptation to the collection, will honor this intention.

As we get a better handle on how site conditions are changing with time, we also look forward to the increasing availability of plant material that may be better suited both to the physical environment and the aesthetics of our Garden. For example, warmer, drier conditions have made varieties of evergreen oak more popular in the Pacific Northwest. Various evergreen oak species, including *Quercus glauca* and *Q. phillyreoides*, are “workhorse” shrubs and small trees in gardens all over Japan and would be a wonderful addition to our Garden.

Gardens are never “done.” They are living, active spaces, and their growth and change is part of why they mean so much to us. At the Seattle Japanese Garden, we creatively manage and adapt to that change in order to preserve the original vision of the designers. Here, one can experience a treasure unique to certain gardens: the timelessness of unceasing change.

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Join our Camellia Circle and embrace the idea of constant renewal within the Seattle Japanese Garden. Our donors are committed to maintaining the beautiful design we were gifted and stewarding it into the future with thought and care.

For more information, contact Lee Benner, Development Director, at lbenner@arboretumfoundation.org or 206-325-4510.