

Zen Gardens

Zen gardens date back to the late sixth century when Zen Buddhist monks created them to aid in contemplation and meditation. Around the eleventh century, Zen gardens were used to teach the principles of the Buddhist religion and to create a deeper understanding of Zen concepts. By the late 1200s, the basic principles of Zen garden design had been established. Since that time, they have been refined but remain largely unchanged.



Typical Zen garden of weathered stones and raked sand.

Shakkei, literally translated as “borrowed landscape,” is one of the basic principles of Japanese gardens and Zen gardens. It means to incorporate the surrounding scenery to make the garden appear to extend beyond its boundaries. The use of rocks and crushed gravel to represent mountains and water is an abstract form of *shakkei*. This reduced-scale dry landscape is what most people think of as a Zen garden. This style of garden is often referred to as *karesansui*, which means “not using water.”

Designing a Zen Garden

A Zen garden is a calming blend of a natural place and a manmade space. It is a place to shut out the stresses and distractions of a hectic world and enjoy peaceful contemplation and tranquility. However, it takes careful planning and much thought to create an appropriate atmosphere for contemplation. Without this planning, a Zen garden can look contrived and out of balance. Consider whether its simple style will conflict with the surroundings and whether its mood will be disturbed by children or pets. Because a Zen garden has such a strong character, it may be best to separate it from the rest of the garden with a wall or fence.

Overall, a Zen garden should portray a naturalistic setting, but on a smaller scale. Its features are designed to represent mountains, islands, and water. An entire landscape can be represented by reducing the scale. Zen gardens are typically built in a small, flat, enclosed space that provides just one vantage point for viewing and contemplation, often from a porch or platform. The Zen garden style can be adapted to almost any flat garden area, and it can offer an ideal solution to represent water where an actual water feature is not practical or desirable. By incorporating a dry streambed, one can even use a Zen garden to provide drainage for garden runoff.

Symbolism is very important in Zen gardens. Every element, whether rock, plant, or expanse of sand, has abstract meaning and symbolic purpose. Everything is interrelated and essential to the overall design of the garden.

Elements of a Zen Garden

The two main elements of a Zen or *karesansui* garden are rocks to represent mountains and sand to represent water. Rocks are also used to symbolize islands, animals, or shrubs. Often, islands of rocks are designed to resemble a tortoise or a crane, which are symbols of longevity and happiness. Rocks and stones should be carefully selected – they are the heart of a Zen garden. Choose weathered rocks in tones of light and dark gray, with patches of lichen. Carefully look at the individual characteristics of each rock, considering its form, color, and texture.

The sand used in Zen gardens is not beach sand; it is actually crushed or decomposed granite, small pebbles, or fine gravel. The particles of crushed granite are angular rather than round, so they can be more easily raked into patterns. Light-colored granite can be used to brighten up a Zen garden in a dark area, but avoid using it in sunny areas where it will be too glaring. If crushed granite isn't readily available in your area, use turkey or chicken grit.

To create a raked-sand area, put down a layer of porous weed barrier fabric and cover it with 2 to 4 inches of crushed granite, fine gravel, or grit. Rake patterns into the sand, using a special wooden rake made for that purpose or a regular garden rake, to mimic natural patterns of ripples and waves around the edges of the banks and rocks.

Other elements, such as bridges, paths, and lanterns, are sometimes added to Zen gardens to serve as focal points or help impart a sense of distance. Bridges and paths allow the garden to be viewed from different angles. Simple bridges made of natural materials, such as flat slabs of stone, suit the style of a *karesansui* garden. Lanterns, if used, should be chosen carefully. To avoid conflicting with the natural atmosphere of the garden, lanterns should be made of wood or stone rather than metal.



Detail of raked sand.



Flat garden of raked sand at Portland's Japanese Garden.

Karesansui gardens may also include plants and trees, but they should be used minimally and should be low and spreading rather than vertical. The plants most often used in a Zen garden are either evergreen or woodland species. Ferns, mosses, pines, hollies, and evergreen ground covers can be used to add texture to the garden and to provide year-round interest. The key is to keep it simple and not use a large number of plants or trees.

Maintaining a Zen Garden

Before you decide to include a dry landscape feature in your garden, make sure you are willing to commit to regular maintenance. A neglected Zen garden is unsightly and not in keeping with the spirit of the garden. If you include plants in your garden, they will require pruning, training, and nurturing. Evergreen trees and shrubs will not drop much litter, but deciduous trees will drop leaves, which are

difficult to remove from raked sand. A Zen garden is not the place for a leaf blower! If there is little wind and no foot traffic, you should only need to re-rake the sand every couple of weeks.

References

Creating Zen Gardens. Retrieved May 16, 2003 (history and information about creating a Zen garden, with photographs)

Keyser, Joseph M. Montgomery County, Maryland Department of Environmental Protection. [Zen gardens provide space for meditation](#). Retrieved May 16, 2003. (text, mostly about designing a Zen garden)

Ortho Books. *Creating Japanese Gardens*. The Scotts Company. 1989.

Sawano, Takashi. *Creating Your Own Japanese Garden*. Shufunotomo Co., Ltd. Tokyo, Japan. 1999.

Sidhe, Morrigan. Theme Garden: Zen Gardens. Retrieved May 16, 2003. (text about history and incorporating metaphysical concepts into a Zen garden)

Zen Gardens. Retrieved May 16, 2003. (text about history and symbolism, with a few photographs)

Additional Information

Many books and Web sites include information about Zen gardens. However, one of the best ways for gaining inspiration and ideas is to visit a Japanese garden that includes a Zen garden, such as the Portland Japanese Garden. Other resources, in addition to the ones listed above, include:

Staud, Frantisek. [Photo Gallery of Japanese Zen Gardens](#). (photographs only)

Talmadge Powell Concepts. Available at: <http://moonhutgardens.com/special%20order.html>. (source of wooden rakes)

[Sand and Stone Garden](#). (dry landscape garden at Portland Japanese Garden)