

A photograph of a Japanese garden. In the foreground, a small waterfall flows over dark, wet rocks. The garden is filled with lush green plants, including tall grasses and ferns. In the background, a large, weathered stone monument or stele is visible, surrounded by more greenery and some red flowers. The overall scene is vibrant and serene.

UCLA's Hannah Carter

Japanese Garden



In the heart of Los Angeles lies a hidden gem.

Story by Rose Gordon

Photos by Reed Hutchinson

Tucked between the large oaks and pines that shade multimillion-dollar Bel-Air homes from star-seekers, a little piece of Japanese culture clings to a sloping hillside. The Hannah Carter Japanese Garden, managed and owned by the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), was designed in the late 1950s by two natives of the island nation. Landscape architect Nagao Sakurai of Tokyo and garden designer Kazuo Nakamura of Kyoto imported hundreds of tons of stones and artifacts directly from Japan to recreate a Japanese-style garden in the most accurate sense for the owner of the estate, Gordon Guiberson.

Nature, Enhanced

Even on a drizzly, December afternoon in smog-plagued Los Angeles, the garden's character and beauty shine. At the entrance, a wooden gate made in Japan of *Cyptomeria*, a Japanese version of the redwood, is the

Top: Large and thirsty plants are watered from overhead by an automated system. Smaller ones, such as camellias, are hand-watered.



The garden is mainly modeled after 13th century Zen gardens.

first sign that you are about to enter a remarkable garden. Interlocking pieces, rather than nails, hold this structure together. In fact, all of the wood pieces in the garden are made of *Cyptomeria* with few nails. The simplicity of structure and design in a Japanese garden intends to bring you closer to nature, says Thomas Tong, who led us on a tour of the garden, which he does for most visitors.

Above the gate are black slate tiles finished with circular pieces that contain more swirling circles. This is where the family crest would normally be, but in this case, the round circles symbolize water. Water symbolism is prevalent in many cultures' design and literature, but for a country surrounded by water, its importance swells. Scattered throughout the garden are water features of varying size and symbolism: a long waterfall, naturally and man-made water basins, a koi pond and a deep, narrow basin once used for bathing.

Immediately upon stepping onto the smooth, stone path that winds its way through the garden, where a red pine — a symbol of the tranquil female force — arches over the path and welcomes visitors, you hear the soft trickle of a fountain. There, just past the gate, is a small waterfall surrounded by vertically placed rocks, a Japanese tradition. Your eye is immediately drawn up toward the horizontal line at the top of the fall. One story says that a fish at the bottom of the fall is also looking toward the top of the fall with you.

Just to the right of the waterfall is the second water fea-

ture, a basin of water with a bamboo ladle. Above this sits the oldest piece in the garden: a stone carving, more than 1,000 years old, depicting the 16 praying positions of Buddha. The basin is just one of many scattered throughout the garden.

Tong dips the bamboo reed into the basin and spills the water over a long, weather-etched rock. He continues to ladle water over the rock until it changes to a deeper color and reveals a jagged pattern reminiscent of rugged terrain, mountains perhaps.

Get Inspired

Important Elements to a Japanese Garden

Waterfalls (*taki*)

Bridges (*hashi*)

Flowers (*hana*)

Islands (*shima*)

Sand (*suna*)

Stones (*ishi/wakura*)

Trees (*ki*) – bamboo, pine and plum are common

Water (*mizu*)

Source: Bowdoin College, Maine

Traditionally, basins were used for hand-washing or even drinking, but today they may simply inspire thought. The idea is that a person can travel from station to station in the garden, and the water will purify them along the way. Some of the basins are carved out to capture the water that trickles from a bamboo waterspout while others are naturally occurring depressions in the stone that catch rainfall. Some hold rocks and little water while others overflow with liquid.

Backyard Beginnings

Only a few years after the garden's completion in 1961, Edward Carter, chair of the regents of the University of California at the time, and his wife Hannah, purchased the Bel-Air estate. They lived in the house at the top of the property, but donated the garden to UCLA.

Hannah, now 91, still lives in the house above the garden, and she ventures down from time to time. One of her favorite spots is a wooden bench half-hidden from the garden's path by a large California Live Oak. She fondly refers to it as her "bus bench." From this

UCLA's Hannah Carter Japanese Garden

position, much of the garden and the surrounding hills are visible. But much of the beauty remains concealed.

Japanese gardens hide many treasures from view. Tong says the gardens might have been shaped by the philosophy that "If all is expressed, what remains?"

"The layout of the UCLA garden can best be attributed to the Zen movement that began in the 13th century," Tong says.

At the center of the garden is a 18,000-gallon pond filled with around 60 koi, although only a handful were visible during our tour. Two pumps service the pond and a third acts as a filter.

A small, smooth-pebbled beach leads up to the edge of the water, and just across, in the center of the pond, is one of two turtle rocks, a large stone with what looks like a head and a small tortoise tail at either end.

A stone path leads around the edge



A flight of stone steps leads to the home of the garden's namesake.



Basins along the garden path are meant to symbolize purification.

of the pond, where you pass other stone animal representatives, rabbits for one. Or you may take your chances with the “devil-casting” stones, which form a zig-zagging bridge to the other side. It’s believed that a devil or negative thoughts chasing you might fall into the water behind you as you cross on the stones.

Just south of the pond, a five-tiered pagoda, another Japanese symbol, towers over a grassy area. Behind the pond is the teahouse, or, more accurately, the garden house. Although tea may be served in the wooden, modest structure, the entrance is taller than that of a typical teahouse, which you would normally have to crawl through. The tea ceremony is very closely related to the Zen philosophy that permeates the garden.

Farther along, a robust waterfall spills along for a run of more than 200 feet with vertical rise of more than 150 feet. This area, known as the Hawaiian gardens, was part of the original grounds of the 1920s estate. A seat on the bench provides a view of the water that rushes straight at you, descending, at the last minute, into another pond directly below it.

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On the other side of the garden, a colorful staircase of blue and red stones symbolizes yet another waterfall. The steps wind their way up to a sunken, narrow bath that was once heated to replicate the natural hot springs used for bathing in Northern Japan. It’s easy to imagine a quiet bath in this heated outdoor tub.

From East To West

Southern California enjoys relatively hospitable weather year-round, which makes it a gardener’s dream in some ways. Still, it’s beginning to cool now, and the koi have taken refuge beneath a large stone in the pond, and the usually brilliant waterlilies are nowhere to be found, although one terrestrial lily is holding out. Winter, of course, is not a pond’s peak time and the garden is a bit shaded, too.

Still, Tong points out that a Japanese garden is meant to be seen in varying



The entrance to the garden sits humbly amid Bel-Air mansions.

shades of green. It was the people, entering the garden for quiet reflection, or poetry readings and other social events, that would provide the color with their kimonos, language and general force of life.

Another Japanese garden design principle is placement. Unlike in a Western garden where you might see a clump of mangolds positioned together, things are a bit more asymmetrical. There are odd numbers of each item placed throughout the garden. Indeed, among a group of ferns, a single bird of paradise plant sprouts up.

Along the path, antique stone lanterns mark the way. In the past, they would have been lit up with candles. Pink and white camellias dot the landscape giving a bit of color between the green of pines, ferns, bamboo and juniper. Thick rhododendrons continue to grow each year. Azaleas, too, make their presence known with an early-bloom of flowers. A Chinese magnolia with pinkish-purple blossoms lends its color to the scene.

The crown jewel of the garden is a nearly black, stark-naked flowering Japanese apricot tree (*Prunus mume*). Even without its leaves and fruit, it stands out as a poetic piece in the garden, worthy of a moment of reflection. It was due to begin blooming in the next month.

Care For The Garden

One challenge the sun-heavy Southern California region faces is frequent drought. The recent Santa Ana winds haven't helped the current situation much either.

A normal season's rainfall for that area of Bel-Air is 18.16 inches according to the County of Los Angeles' Department of Public Works. Head gardener Joe Ross ensures that the four main water features continue to operate, regardless of drought by recycling the water that feeds them. His pump-house, a tidy, cramped affair, includes the two waterfall



Placement is asymmetrical in Japanese gardens, often grouping things in uneven numbers and arrangements.

pumps for the pond and its filter as well as the pump for the Hawaiian gardens. It sits below the garden to the left of the entrance. Pipes move any overflow from the ponds back through the system.

The water is pumped in from the Owens Valley in Northern California. It's a pure source that suffers few water-quality issues, Ross noted. His only occasional problem comes in the spring with potential algae bloom.

During the spring until mid-November, an overhead system is turned on weekly to keep the ground cover wet, but the azaleas, camellias and rhododendrons are hand-watered all year long because of their sensi-


tivity to soil conditions and to prevent fungal disease. Hand-watering takes place later in the week, dependent on water, and it takes Ross and Cornelio Franco, the other garden caretaker, 4 to 4½ hours to complete the task. Both men work 40 hours a week on the garden. It's definitely a full-time job, Ross notes. They clean and water on Mondays, but barely any water is wasted, he says.

Everything is pruned heavily to keep the garden contained in the space available. A task that seems impossible at times, given the number of plants and trees represented. There are 80 varieties of azaleas, 30-plus of camellias and countless number of bamboo and fern varieties. Water plants, such as horse-tails (*Equisetum hyemale*) and lotus

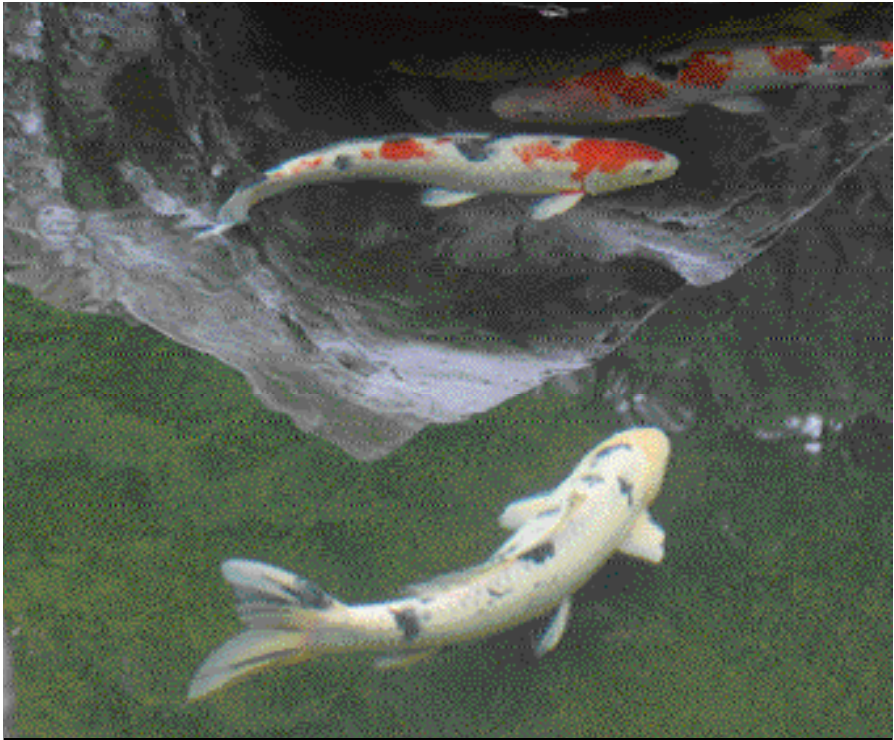
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(*Nelumbo nucifera*) are also heavily represented. Yet, it is the trees — magnolias, pines and maples — that seem to anchor the garden and shroud it from the busy outside world.

The garden is open to the public, but only for limited hours during the week and by appointment. Last year, the Consulate General of Japan toured the grounds with his wife. Tong said that for some visitors, even the garden's smell is reminiscent of Japan, but visitors of all backgrounds seem to smile secretly at something while wandering the path up the garden's hill.

To schedule a visit or learn more, visit www.japanesegarden.ucla.edu or call (310) 794-0320. 

Writer Rose Gordon lives in Southern California.



Around 60 koi live in the garden.