

JAPAN'S GREEN AMBASSADORS: JAPANESE GARDENS OVERSEAS

Considered the most scenic and authentic of the Japanese gardens overseas, the Portland Japanese Garden in the U.S. has welcomed, delighted and soothed four hundred and fifty thousand visitors per year since its renewal in 2017.

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ABOUT a hundred and twenty years ago when world's fairs were electrifying the U.S. and Europe, Japan's government decided to introduce visitors to Japanese culture through arts, crafts and the charms of Japanese gardens. World War II stopped that outreach, but after it was over Japan began laying out gardens again in sister cities as a symbol of friendship.

Over five hundred Japanese gardens have now sprung up all over the world. The most highly acclaimed is the Portland Japanese Garden in the U.S. state of Oregon. Professor Takuma Tono of the Tokyo University of Agriculture designed this garden, which opened in 1967. It now spans more than twelve acres, features eight different gardens, has three pavilions and attracts around 450,000 people a year—many of them repeat visitors.

The garden curator of the Portland Japanese Garden, Sadafumi Uchiyama, says the allure of Japanese gardens is the chance to experience the beauty of traditional Japanese culture while also being soothed by the surroundings.

“Humans are creations of nature, so when physically or mentally tired we feel the urge to refresh ourselves in natural environments,” says Uchiyama. “This feeling

View of the Portland Japanese Garden | Photo by Portland Japanese Garden



Flat garden and pavilion from beneath a weeping cherry tree | Photo by Jonathan Ley



Beautiful and serene rock garden | Photo by Portland Japanese Garden

is universal, no matter your nationality or race. As such, Japanese gardens' re-creations of nature, with their trees, rocks and ponds, are attractive to many people outside of Japan."

After a major expansion that took two years, the garden reopened in 2017. The primary aim of the project was to make it even more appealing as a healing space.

"Gardens are meant to be serene places, but as the garden gained popularity maintaining this quality became difficult," Uchiyama explains. "To preserve that sense of peace, we've added paths and benches around the garden, and built a new building with cultural facilities and cafes to reduce the sense of crowdedness."

Kengo Kuma, the architect behind the New National Stadium in Tokyo that will be the primary venue for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, designed this new structure. Reflecting the design of traditional Japanese houses, the building blends in harmoniously with the Japanese garden. It has also been LEED* certified for being environmentally friendly.

Japanese gardens have proven to be charming, soothing conduits for Japanese culture worldwide. Some, however, face maintenance issues due to inadequate budgets or a lack of trained staff. In 2017, Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism responded to that situation by launching a Japanese garden overseas restoration project. The project's aim is to revive gardens that have fallen into disrepair so that these verdant and tran-

quil spaces can once again spark interest in Japanese culture and inspire visitors to travel to Japan.

Uchiyama is assisting the project by providing information and skilled experts. "To ensure that Japanese gardens overseas are properly maintained, we must help staff gain the necessary skills," he says, "so in 2012, I and a half dozen other practitioners set up the North American Japanese Garden Association, which provides a support network to refine technical skills. At the Portland Japanese Garden I initiated the establishment of the International Japanese Garden Training Center, where they teach everything from practical skills such as garden architecture, construction and management to essential cultural traditions such as the Japanese tea ceremony and flower arrangement."

Whether through the government project or Uchiyama's efforts, the more properly maintained Japanese gardens there are, the more attention these serene spots will attract.

"However, if too much emphasis is placed on the artistic and cultural qualities of Japanese gardens, some people may lose interest in visiting," Uchiyama warns. "While those elements are certainly important, I want to create a space that appeals to the full range of human emotions—as well as be a place of healing—and make it easily accessible to everyone." 

* LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, and also refers to the certifying measures used to assess the environmental impact of buildings and cities employed by the U.S.-based nonprofit Green Building Council.



Portland Japanese Garden's new facilities | Photo by James Florio