





With three years of experience in taking tours to various countries, horticulturist and tour operator Brian Sams discusses the benefits of travelling to gardens and what we can learn from the experience.



- 01 Camellia japonica seasonal colour.
- 02 Ancient pines in Kenrokeun Kanasawa.
- 03 Simplicity works.

Careful placement of pagoda in Kenrokeum, Kanasawa.

he Japanese garden style has widespread appeal to the general gardening community and to landscape architects. The Japanese notion of a garden being a reflection of nature is a constant theme and one that has great resonance to most people involved in working with plants and working in gardens. Wild mountains, water courses, ponds, impossibly old trees and well tended plants together with tranquil areas for reflection and meditation have a strong international and intergenerational appeal.

While leading a garden tour to Japan in April 2009 it became apparent that many of the elements that make some of the great gardens in Japan are the very same elements that make great gardens anywhere. Those elements include: layered planting; using garden artifacts and cultural elements wisely; water; balance between hard and soft elements; and creating places for people. While the elements may be the same the story the garden is telling is, and needs to be, reflective of the culture and the sense of place.

So what lessons from a Japanese garden apply to creating an Australian garden?

Most Japanese gardens use plants very simply. Plants are selected and grown according to their cultural relevance. Plants are selected that will grow well in the local area. In other words hardy proven performers were used that were suited to both climate and soils. Massed plantings of cherry trees to line waterways; hardy

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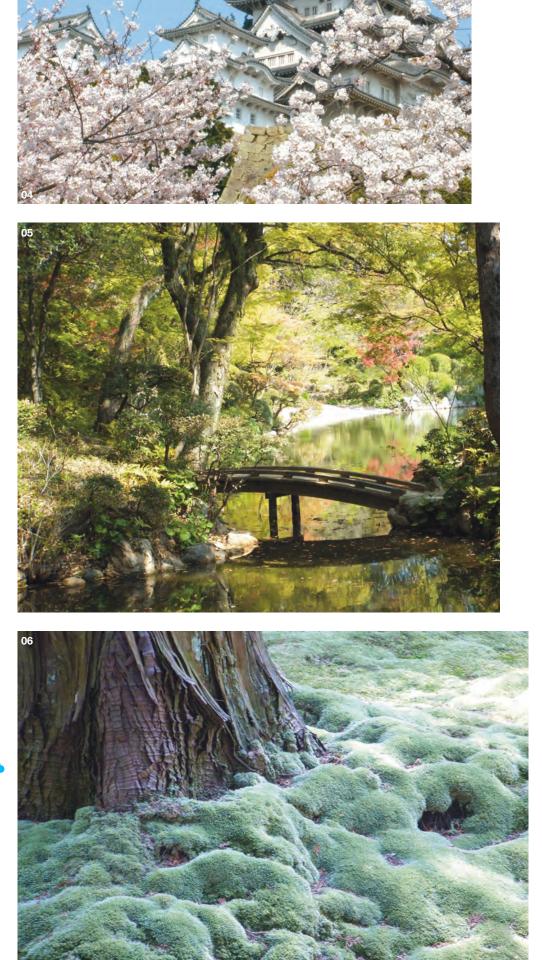
conifers of many types; moss, liriope and mondo grass as groundcovers; and deciduous and evergreen azaleas or camellias for colour. Plantings were generally arranged in layers – a canopy, middle story and groundcovers. The lesson is clear – choose plants that perform well in the local area and do not be afraid to use many plants of the same type to create a massed effect using layers of foliage to create interest.

Nearly all Japanese gardens use water to create a balance between soft and hard, to stimulate the senses of sight, sound and smell and above all else to reflect the changing scenery that is a garden throughout the day. The Shukeien garden in Hiroshima uses water as the main element to connect the garden. Shukeien is a 'stroll' garden designed to be viewed from all sides as you move around the central pond using the outer path. The water is a constant in a garden that changes as you move. It provides places for meditation. It provides places for rest. The reflections of carefully pruned and shrunken trees (Shukeien literally means shrunken scenery), bridges and pavilions are both stimulating for the mind and relaxing on the eye. Even when water is scarce the essence of water can be created with dry river beds, flat stones set to imitate a small pond, raked mulch or gravel laid out as if water is set to flow.

The Japanese term for this imitation of water is *Kare-sanshui* and is widely used both in the famous gardens of Japan and private gardens. This concept has a place in Australian gardens where water in many parts of

- 04 Himeji Castle Japan.
- 05 Shukeien Garden, Hiroshima.
- 06 Moss temple Zen garden.

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07 The two-legged snow lantern at Kenrokuen, Kanasawa.

08 Philospher's Walk - Kyoto.

09 Water where there is none – Ryonji, Kyoto.

our country is such a precious commodity. In tropical and subtropical gardens where water is not as limited it can add that extra dimensions of sound, smell and reflection.

When most people think of the hard elements in a Japanese garden they identify lanterns, urns and pagodas. In fact the best Japanese gardens use these elements sparingly. The famous two-legged snow lantern (Kotojitoro) in Kenrokuen garden in Kanasawa is a good case in point. The lantern is placed on the edge of the pond at the top of a rise. It looks larger as you approach it from a path winding up the hill and then is subordinate to the larger water area that it overlooks the closer you get. It appears into view from many parts of the garden yet is not much taller than a metre. The key is in the placement of garden art and artifacts and in restraint in terms of number and size.

What do Zen gardens have do with us? Very few Australians are Buddhist. Very few meditate on a regular basis. Very few understand the intricacies of this garden style.

Yet nearly all Westerners who visit a Zen garden in Japan find an instantaneous connection. The sense of calm that is created with the careful placement of pavilions, stones, garden elements, clipped trees and numerous shades of green satisfies some universal human needs. The need to slow down, to find nature, to reflect on who and what you are and what you would like to be. The need to find peace. The need to rise above the mundane nature of everyday life.

Visiting gardens from a different culture, climate and philosophy can provide insights into how we can improve our own gardens. Japanese gardens demonstrate tranquility, restraint and calm – universal themes that are useful in gardens everywhere.





More information

Brian Sams is a horticulturist based in Toowoomba Queensland. Brian teaches horticulture, is involved in horticultural communication, consultation and leading garden tours. Tours planned for 2010 include trips to Italy/England, Canada/Alaska and China.

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