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# Creating a Japanese Rock Garden

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## PURPOSE

To stimulate research into the aesthetics, traditions, and natural resources used in rock gardens of Japan; to connect the role of nature to religious beliefs and practices and to everyday lifestyles of the Japanese people.

## THEME STATEMENT

Aesthetics, Culture & Values (ACV): All people need things of beauty, times of leisure and celebration, and a sense of values and service in their lives.

## SUGGESTED TIME

Two or three sessions of thirty minutes each.

## KEY VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS

- Zen Buddhism = Japanese and Chinese school of religious beliefs asserting that enlightenment can be attained through meditation, self-contemplation, and intuition, rather than through scriptures
- principles = guidelines
- technique = systematic procedure
- elements = parts of natural and built environments

## MATERIALS NEEDED

Small cardboard boxes for miniature gardens (*e.g.*, shoe boxes), sand, forks (rakes), pebbles of varying sizes, twigs, pine needles, glass pieces or aluminum foil (reflective lakes), modeling clay (bridges and sculptured elements), pictures and reference books on Japanese gardens.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

“The gardens of Japan are works of art that use nature as a material of creation” (Keane, p.118). See attached handouts which discuss principles, techniques, and elements of Japanese gardens.

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## SUMMARY

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Adaptable Levels  
Grades 2-12

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Related Themes  
PPE, CCC

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Values  
Appreciation

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Skills  
Communicating, research,  
creating

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Integration  
Art, social studies, math,  
science, reading, literature

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**INITIATION (Inquiry, Preview, Involvement)**

1. Quickly flash through several slides or pictures of Japanese rock gardens. Ask that students observe and “listen only” to their feelings without words. Following the visuals, orally share or record students’ feelings and impressions.
2. Repeat the visuals, this time identifying principles (techniques and elements) of traditional Japanese gardens as noted on the resource sheets.

**DEVELOPMENT (Instruction, Data Collection, Organization)**

1. Ask each student to select a natural object (detail) and to begin building a miniature garden embodying the techniques and elements just learned. Set a time as a checkpoint on progress and a final limit for completion of the garden and a sharing of the symbolism and principles.
2. Encourage students to locate their own elements, both natural and built, for incorporating further details into the overall design.
3. Emphasize that these elements are added, one at a time, with the overall effect studied prior to adding another.
4. Incorporate the key questions below at appropriate times to stimulate thinking and summaries.

**EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT (Idea Articulation, Ownership, Experimentation)**

- Plan a display and tour of the rock gardens with “gardeners” serving as tour guides. Maintain an atmosphere of quiet contemplation throughout the session.
- As work proceeds, ask students to continue adding to their initial list of descriptors identified when first viewing Japanese gardens and to share “the Japanese feel” through oral or written essays.

**ASSESSMENT OF ACHIEVEMENT**

- Throughout the process, ask each student to assess his/her own progress in applying the basic techniques and elements into the gardens.
- At the first and final checkpoint, divide students into small sharing groups to articulate and assess the use of principles, techniques, and/or elements and to make suggestions for further building and sharing of the garden.
- Students assess their performance and product with rubrics adapted from the following (select whichever items in parentheses apply to the given assessment):
  - 4 = (My) (our) garden truly reflects (the principles, techniques, elements)  
(our creativity in representing Japanese cultures)
  - 3 = (My) (our) garden will be improved by making the following revisions:  
*student explains revisions.*
  - 2 = (I) (our group) need/s guidance while continuing
  - 1 = (I) (our group) need/s immediate assistance

## KEY QUESTIONS

- In creating the Japanese garden, which techniques and elements that you used best reflect what is most characteristic of the people, place, and environment of Japan?
- What did you learn about the traditional values and lifestyles of the Japanese that you admire? What did you learn that would not “fit” your lifestyle?
- Historically, what changes have occurred in the process and product of Japanese gardening? What further changes do you predict?
- How did sharing and assessing your own rock garden assist you in your creative process?

## ALTERNATIVES

- Precede the lesson with an in-depth study of the principles of design common to all visual and performing arts of Japan (e.g., painting, landscaping, architecture, music, dance, drama).
- Precede or infuse the lessons by collecting and arranging a display of art elements and symbols representative of Asian cultures.
- Ask each group to select a famous garden of Japan and to analyze the setting for demonstration of each of the design techniques and elements.
- Set the stage for each session by reading selections of Japanese poetry and religious meditations.

## REFERENCES & RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### ***The following resources are for teacher background:***

- Keane, Marc P. *Japanese Garden Design*. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle, 1996. (ISBN 0-8048-2071-6)  
Gives an in-depth treatment of gardens of Japan, including color photographs, paintings, sketches, history, locations, principles of design techniques and elements, and a glossary of plants and vocabulary.
- Kwok, Man-Ho, Martin Palmer and Jay Ramsay. *Tao Te Ching*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993. (ISBN 1-56619-617-5)  
Reveals the glory of *Tao Te Ching* in a vivid collection of ancient sayings, commentaries, calligraphy, and art works.

### ***The following resources are for student research:***

- Ohashi, Haruzo. *Japanese Courtyard Gardens*. Tokyo: Graphic-sha Publishing Co., Ltd., 1988. (ISBN 0-87040-766-X)  
Captures, in color photographs, the unique magic of timeless serene spaces in the intimate beauty of Japan’s courtyard gardens.
- Ohashi, Haruzo. *Japanese Gardens of the Modern Era*. Tokyo: Graphic-sha Publishing Co., Ltd. (ISBN 0-87040-747-3)  
Offers a tour of one hundred classic garden landscapes of Japan.
- Ohashi, Haruzo. *The Japanese Garden: Islands of Serenity*. Tokyo: Graphic-sha Publishing Co., Ltd. (ISBN 0-87040-743-0)  
Visits through the camera lens the private Japanese gardens from the 18th century to present, illustrating principles of flawless design.

## STUDENT HANDOUT #1:

*Nine Design Techniques/Principles of Japanese Gardens*

[Summarized from Keane, Marc P. *Japanese Garden Design*. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle, 1996, pp. 115-57.]

## 1. ENCLOSURE &amp; ENTRY:

In Japan, entering a group and becoming a member is an act of great social importance; thus, entries to gardens are important. Also, Japanese gardens, as well as parts within a garden, are clearly enclosed or framed, largely due to the compressed nature of an urban site as an independent work of art. Different scenes within the garden may be divided by gates, a grove of trees, or a bend or rise in the path.

## 2. VOID &amp; ACCENT:

This is best described by the word “ma” defined as a space or void (physical, social or temporal) such as a punctuation of movement in Japanese dance or theater, moments of silence in music, social distance between host and guest during a tea ceremony, emptiness left in an ink painting, or expressive voids within gardens—the beauty of paucity.

## 3. BALANCE:

Balance is, along with “ma,” one of the most important design principles that give the garden a Japanese feeling. Balance is asymmetric (no single item absolutely dominant; the eye meanders); off-centered (very few if any straight paths or axial arrangements); and based on triads (triangular shapes in flower arrangements, bonsai, and artwork). Pine trees, often used, are naturally triangular.

## 4. PLANES &amp; VOLUMES:

Japanese garden designers balance plane surfaces with volumes. A flat garden of stark raked sand provides stillness, whereas fences, walls and clipped hedges frame and “divide the ground.” The effect resembles cubist art and gives ancient gardens a modern look.

## 5. SYMBOLOGY:

Deep meaning is achieved by interweaving symbolic images for religion (triad of boulders as image of Buddha and attendants); “good fortune/long life” through images of island/mountain (solitary rock in a pond) where immortals are said to live; extended landscape images in a small area with a few representatives (boulder in a sheet of white sand for a mountain and ocean); or “life lessons” through a statuary pine symbolizing stability and longevity.

## 6. BORROWED SCENERY:

The visual scale of a small garden is enlarged by incorporating a distant view as an integral part of the garden. The whole effect is to pull the view forward and to link it as part of the garden.

## 7. MITATE (me-tah-teh):

This is the process of “seeing anew” or of finding a new use for an old object (a stone as a base of a lantern or mill stones as stepping stones).

## 8. THE PATH:

The garden path, while creating a design for the garden, also controls the cadence of motion and what is seen. A large stepping stone, following a series of small stones keeping the eyes cast downward, allows the visitor to stop and look around at a planned view of the garden from a designated perspective. The path is planned to reveal a series of scenes, alternately hidden and then visible.

## 9. DETAILS vs. MASTER PLANNING:

A Western garden is developed “down from the master plan,” whereas the Japanese garden is designed “up from the details.” Natural materials are chosen, one by one, for unique qualities, studied for balance when positioned and, based upon the effect, followed by another.

## STUDENT HANDOUT #2:

*Seven Elements Associated with Japanese Gardens*

[Summarized from Keane, Marc P. *Japanese Garden Design*. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle, 1996, pp. 115-57.]

## 1. ROCKS:

Rocks are used functionally (as fences, retaining walls, paths) and perceived artistically by designers in four ways:

- animistic: rocks contained godspirit or supernatural power; in early classic periods when gardens were usually built at a site that contained a “Spirit Rock”
- religious imagery: in sacred mountains or the Buddha triads
- painterly manner: when rocks mimic monochromatic paintings (mountains, bridges, boats)
- sculptural elements: of rocks with unusual shapes or elements (resembling animals, clothing, etc.)

## 2. WHITE SAND:

White sand (granite composed of white feldspar, gray quartz, and black mica) and water (oceans and rains filling rivers, lakes and waterfalls) are synonymous with Japan. Raked white sand, mimicking the rhythmic motion of waves, was first used in Zen gardens and parallels the white spaces in ink paintings.

## 3. WATER:

Buddhists use the natural process of water (springs from a mountain, gathering strength as it rushes into a valley and dissipating calmly into a sea) as a metaphor for human existence: birth, growth, death, and rebirth. Water also provides the luxury of a visual space, breaking a confined garden even when it cannot be entered physically.

## 4. PLANTINGS:

Once possessing poetic and geomantic meanings, plantings (now used as hedges, shade, and flowering accents) may range from austere gardens of medieval Zen temples to closely clipped, tight-mounded shrubbery forms.

- pines: Contain symbolic attributes of longevity and permanence (as evergreens). Japanese red pines represent mountains and femininity, whereas Japanese black pines represent seashores and masculinity because of the masculine qualities in branches and needles. Pines require maintenance (intensive pruning to recreate the shapes of natural settings, age, and size, with every needle trimmed at least once a year.
- bamboo: More likely used as a fence than a plant, bamboo is an image of resilience and the hollow trunk in ink paintings as a metaphor for the Zen principle of an empty heart.
- plum and cherry: The plum (often heavily and artfully pruned back to a gnarled old trunk with tender young shoots) and the cherry (allowed to grow fully) are symbolic of evanescence or a fading away and vanishing effect.

The classical botanical trio of Japanese plantings (pine, bamboo, and plum) represent a ranking system of three good things in descending order and reflect great happiness or bliss.

## 5. BRIDGES:

In gardens and paintings, bridges are both functional (physical crossings) and symbolic (links bridging the gap between two worlds—that of man and the gods) representing the passage out of the world of humans into the larger world of nature, or an ordinary plane of consciousness to a higher one.

- curved bridges: In contemplative gardens, curved bridges infer the possibility of rebirth in paradise.
- stone-slab bridges: In Zen temples, these bridges over dry rivers of sand set miniature landscapes.
- red lacquered wooden bridges: Chinese-style bridges which symbolize contemplation of nature in order to discover the inner meaning of life.

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#### 6. SCULPTURAL ORNAMENTS:

Obvious sculptural ornaments are usually shunned in Japanese gardens, but sculptured elements (lanterns not for lighting, stupas or shrines, rocks, clipped shrubs and pruned pines) are incorporated for the spirit of the sculptor.

#### 7. WALLS & FENCES:

Walls and fences are primarily used for enclosures and dividers within a garden and are designed to obstruct or reveal. Wooden fences may be roofed (narrow or spaced above) as a shield against weather. Solid earthen walls are low to provide privacy below eye level while not obscuring the view beyond. Wing fences protruding from a building or veranda lend privacy and control views. Fences and walls may be highly decorative and varied (over twenty-five varieties of bamboo fences alone, excluding the numerous varieties of wooden fences, twig-bundle fences, earthen walls, and even concrete simulations of natural materials).