

Bonsai

Restful retreat from the hectic

By RALPH O'REILLY

To me the essential components of a Japanese garden are Wabi and Sabi. Without them there can be no Japanese garden.

One should be born Japanese to grasp their feeling, but, failing that, Westerners should accept and contemplate these new words as keys to much that is delightful in Japanese art and culture. They are what make us gasp in astonishment and pleasure when shown a successful garden.

Kyuzo Murata, elder bonsai master in Japan, says, "Wabi is a state of mind, or a place, or environment, in the tea ceremony, or in Haiku. It is a feeling of great simplicity, quiet yet dignified. Sabi is a feeling of simplicity and quietness which comes from something that is old and used over and over again."

These evocative words frame every decision in planning and detailing your garden, and it is hoped they will be reflected as the garden develops and matures. (It is never finished).



Formal entrance gate blends man-made structures with nature. It separates a tranquil retreat from the harsh outer world.

Where to start? Consider areas closely related to family activities and closely related to

the house. The garden should be part of both, not just a pretty unrelated corner, looked at on special occasions.

It might be in front of the house, an adjunct to the entrance, perhaps more formal and public in this case.

Or it might face onto the windows of the principal room, where it becomes an outdoor counterpart and compliment of a gracious indoor setting, inseparable from the room itself. It may be in back, incorporated into an existing patio or work areas close to the house, where it is much utilized by the family.

It can even be very effective in a confined narrow area between buildings, lending charm and interest to an otherwise dreary passageway. In any event, it should be smaller rather than larger, as Japanese gardens require much hand maintenance, and the unit cost is very high.

How long does it take to make? There seems to be no completion date for a Japanese garden. It is more of a career than a project. While the assembling and placement of material can be scheduled, the maturing of the plantings and the achieving of certain effects is a very long-term process, very gradual.

To help visualize the goal, immerse yourself in the large number of beautifully illustrated books available through your library. If there are none on the shelves, your librarian can get them for you.

The artistry of the photographs in Japanese garden books reveals the feeling of Wabi and Sabi more than any amount of philosophical writing.

There is no particular requirement for the terrain; it can be utterly flat or hilly and varied. Some logical pattern of traffic is decided upon (or a sequence

of viewing), and the features take form around this pattern.

Perhaps the first, intermediate and final admonition for Westerners approaching Japanese garden design is restraint. Understatement does not come easily for Americans. The finished garden should suggest the subdued, natural beauty of Japan, not shout it.

Artifacts should be few and restrained, and somewhat isolated. The stone lantern, Buddha, pagoda or frog should be natural stone or weathered concrete, but painted ones are atrocities. Wooden structures are not painted, but are either stained or left to weather naturally.

Plant selection can be broad indeed, using either exotic or native trees, shrubs and herbage, both coniferous and deciduous. Generous use of conifers provides interesting contrast with deciduous material and prevents the garden from becoming colorless in winter.

Ferns, ornamental grasses, wildflowers and bamboo are valuable but subtle elements. Booming annuals and perennials have a minor role in the Japanese garden, much subservient to plants grown primarily for foliage.

A single clump of iris or daffodils is much more striking than a whole bed of them.

Stone, in the form of boulders, gravel or sand is usually basic and conspicuous. This restraint here is not to overwhelm and to avoid the bizarre. Boulders should be half-buried, as though they had been there for centuries.

Japanese gardening is a relatively new and totally delightful aspect of horticulture in Michigan. It is impossible to more than hint at a 1,400-year-old art form in this space. If only a few seeds have been planted and begin to germinate, the purpose is served.



Bonsai collection on stained wood stand is enhanced by plain rush background. Groundcover is pachysandra and pygmy bamboo.

Ralph O'Reilly is the owner of the Ozawa Bonsai Garden on Davisburg Rd., in Davisburg. It is open for public viewing from June through September.