Script of the Recorded Japanese Garden Tour

By Ellen Widmayer, revised August 2008 by Unit 86 volunteers

This scripted garden tour was written and recorded in 1992 and has been updated periodically ever since. While the station map referenced in this tour is no longer in use, it still provides an excellent introduction to the garden and has been included in the sourcebook as at reference for guides. We recommend double-checking plant & lantern placements before including this information in your tour.

Welcome to the Japanese Garden at the Washington Park Arboretum. The Garden is operated and maintained by Seattle Parks and Recreation in partnership with the Arborteum Foundation.

ENTRANCE:

Before entering, take a few moments to consider the garden's history and unique characteristics. The Village Gatehouse was built in 2008 with generous financial support from private and public funds. The structure was designed by architect Bob Hoshide, and Nakano Associates designed the entryway landscape. The bronze gate was created by a well known Seattle sculptor, Gerard Tsutakawa. This was one of the first large-scale Japanese Gardens constructed outside Japan. Juki Iida, a designer and builder of many distinguished Japanese gardens, supervised the construction of this garden that began in March 1960 and was completed in June 1960. The integration of various features in the garden presents pleasing vistas, points of special interest, and smooth transitions from scene to scene and demonstrates the skills of the designer.

Gardens have played an important part in Japanese art and architecture since earliest times. Japanese gardens were introduced to the United States in the early 20th century. Here in Seattle, plants were selected to fit our soil and climate. The pond, rocks, and buildings were designed to work with the plants to suggest familiar geographical areas and well-known places in Japan. At times, the garden reflects the influence of Chinese and Japanese mythology and literature.

This is a "stroll garden" designed to be enjoyed at a leisurely pace. As· you follow the route outlined in this self-guided tour, pause the player at your discretion and allow yourself plenty of time to observe the many subtle details of the garden. Make use of the benches strategically placed to allow you to view the garden in detail.

From time to time, you will hear references to specific numbered stations. These numbers represent key areas described in the audio tour. Throughout your visit, please walk carefully and stay on the paths.

STATION ONE:

When you cross the threshold to the garden, notice the large flat rock under the roof of the gate. This stone acts as a transition point between the day- to-day world you are leaving and the tranquil realm of the garden. As you enter the garden, imagine a hand-scroll painting partially opened in front of you. You cannot see the whole picture at once. While you explore the garden, the painting seems to unroll bit-by-bit before you. At every bend in the path, a little more of the painting is revealed, guiding you to quiet areas and surprising views. This technique, mie-gakure, "hide and reveal," conveys a sense of vastness in a small space.

Walk up the main entry path and notice the old Japanese lace leaf maple (Acer palmatum dissectum) reaching down from the sloping mountainside to greet you. Nestled among some craggy rocks is a shore pine (Pinus contorta).

On your right is a dry riverbed, kare sansui, an element which in Japanese means a dry landscape of mountains and water. Here too, is a flat-topped yukimi doro, or "snow-viewing lantern." Near the lantern is another Japanese lace leaf maple. Years of careful pruning have created a graceful shape.

Further along, on your right, is a paper-bark maple (Acer griseum) with its coppery and peeling trunk. It is spectacular in all seasons.

Kasuga-style lantern marks a division in the path at this point. Walk toward the bridge and pause long enough to listen to the sounds of the stream and the waterfall, the birds, and the rustling of foliage. Observe the Kasuga-style l·antern from this angle. Such lanterns originated at Kasuga Shrine in Nara, Japan. This Shinto shrine was founded in the eighth century when Nara was the capital of the country. It was built upon a site called "Kasuga Hill." Over the centuries, these lanterns became popular and a standard in later Japanese gardens.

Lanterns came to Japan with Buddhism in the sixth century and were used first in Buddhist religious ceremonies. Many lanterns, such as this one, show the intermixing of native Shinto beliefs with those of newly arrived Buddhism. There are carved images on this lantern. The fire box features Shinto images at Kasuga shrine, motifs of deer, and three mountains carved in relief. Buddhist carvings on the lantern are the lotus petals at the base and the tear-drop shaped sacred gem called hoju on the top.

After admiring the Kasuga-style lantern, look left to enjoy the stream running down from the forest and the mountain. Now look past the lantern down the stream bed, and savor the subdued scene of water flowing through the large mossy rocks with azaleas and rhododendrons lining the stream banks. If you turn around here, you can look up the dry stream to see a lovely scene suggesting a river.

From the lantern, take the path on the right.

Maintaining the garden as it was originally conceived requires constant pruning and care. As you tour the garden, watch for particularly dramatic lines and forms that result from meticulous pruning or training.

STATION TWO:

Station two is about twenty paces further, beginning at the gravel path leading to stepping stones across the river. Walk to the bank of the river, then, look across the water and up the hill toward the waterfall. Notice the array of beautiful Japanese maples.

Return to the main garden path.

Beyond the side path to the river, in the grassy area to the left of the main garden path, is the first of three tall maidenhair, or Ginkgo (Ginkgo biloba) trees. The origins of this tree date to prehistoric times and can be found in fossilized form, including some in Eastern Washington. The Ginkgo tree has lovely fan-shaped leaves that turn golden yellow in the fall. Just beyond the bench, you will see the other Ginkgo trees. Take time to investigate the side path toward the teahouse.

As you approach the stream, look at the flat rocks lining the stream and the snow-viewing lantern on top of a massive stone. Notice the large stepping stones crossing the stream. Slightly to the left of the main set of stones is an example of a "passing stone." This stone enables one to step aside for another out of courtesy. This reflects a custom which asks that someone of lower rank step aside for someone of higher rank. The small backwater created by these large stones provides spawning grounds for the colorful koi in the garden's pond. The koi population is held in check by great blue herons that fly from Lake Washington to feed on the young.

When the level of Lake Washington was lowered during construction of the ship canal in 1916, this area became a marshland. This physical feature affected design considerations for the garden. For instance, watercourses were constructed to take advantage of the land'scontour and to blend with the general character of the garden. These watercourses also provide the calming sound of running water. The garden'spond was excavated to provide the striking centerpiece of the garden. It is a mirror that reflects trees, clouds, and the sky.

Return to the main path now, and proceed to station three.

STATION THREE:

About fifteen paces up the path is the first good view of the pond. It seems to rise just beyond a rocky cape. The lantern at the tip of the cape is a misaki-gata, or cape lantern.

This rocky peninsula was carefully copied from a garden at the Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto. It represents an extending shoreline covered with stones, a suhama. After viewing the cape, look across the lake toward the teahouse. Did you notice how the silt bottom of the lake enhances reflections in the water?

Observe that the pines lining the lake shore in the foreground to your left have been pruned to give the illusion of a windswept shore.

The next stop is the East Gate. This was the original entry gate to the garden . Increasing traffic made it necessary to move the entrance to the South Gate.

Notice the number of Shore pines facing the gate. They have been pruned to accentuate their vertical lines. Both the pines and the lantern accent and lead the way to the bridges, island, and views beyond.

On the left side of the path there is another stone lantern. Take time to study the six distinct parts:

- A tear-drop shaped sacred gem called hoju at the top.
- The hood with its curled tip, named warabi te for its resemblance to the furled tip of the bracken fern in early spring.
- The hexagonal firebox with two sides open for the light and the other four sides with carved designs.
- A base on which the first three parts stand.
- The long pedestal embedded in a foundation stone.
- The lotus petal pattern, repeated at the base on a hexagonal plinth.

Ahead on the path toward the lake are two bridges in different styles. They form a connecting path between the east and west sides of the lake. The curved bridge represents a earth covered log bridge, or dobashi commonly found near villages. This type of bridge traditionally has no railings. The other bridge is a yatsuhashi -type, a wood planked bridge built with a midway zig-zag that encourages a leisurely passage and provides views of the garden from various angles. This type of bridge is a literary reference to a poem in the tenth century work titled Tales of lse. The poem describes a traveling poet who came upon a profusion of Japanese Iris, Kakitsubata, blooming in shallow water beside an eight-planked bridge. Look for the numerous iris beds (Iris ensata) on the pond's shore.

From the yatsuhashi - type bridge, observe how the pine trees on the island between the bridges have been trained to extend over the water. It takes many years to attain this effect. The bridge also provides an excellent opportunity to view the northern end of the garden that represents a port town at the base of the mountains.

The tall reflection lantern slightly to your left is another snow-viewing lantern. It marks the entrance to the harbor of the port town. From this point, a careful viewer may see koi in the water, turtles on the rocks, and bullfrogs along the lakeshore.

Before leaving the wooden bridge, look back toward the South Gate, where you entered the garden. Observe the teahouse, the iris beds, the rocky stream entering the lake, and the windswept pines on the shore.

Return now to the East Gate and proceed to station four.

STATION FOUR:

As you approach station four look back to enjoy the view of the two bridges from this angle.

Turtle Island is on your left. Can you see turtles on the stones on the south tip of the island? The influence of Chinese mythology on Japanese gardens is seen here in the design of the pine-clad island representing the Islands of the Immortals. These islands were inhabited by those who had gained eternal youth and magical powers. These immortals could fly through the air on cranes and ride on the backs of turtles. The pines on the island suggest these cranes. These islands, according to legend, rested upon the backs of giant tortoises.

Looking north you can see a wisteria trellis extending over the water. The wisteria trellis has been set to one side of the harbor welcoming people into the port town. The purple wisteria blooms in late May, as does the yellow iris beneath it. Continue strolling. As you pass the wisteria trellis, notice·how the vines are intertwined and wrap around the supporting posts. The recently replaced posts are cut from Alaska Yellow Cedar trees which had grown in the garden, and when they died, were recycled. The large flat stepping stones beneath the trellis extend the main garden path across the lake outlet, where its water begins the journey to the sea.

STATION FIVE:

Proceed on the main path, and turn left onto the path of broad, regular flagstones. You are now at the north end of the lake. This area represents a port town with a cut-stone boat dock. On the corner of the dock, replicating an old signal light stands an omokage-gata, a reflection lantern. It is perched on a stone ring to better illuminate the harbor.

Five shore pines (Pinus contorta) are found to your right, at the western edge of the harbor. They recall the five pines of Miho-no -seki and the harbor on the western coast of Japan. This famous harbor is known to many Japanese by Seki No Gohonmatsu, a popular folk song about these five pines. The view from Miho-no-seki is especially fine.

Near the stone wall on the left, at the northwest corner of the pond, is a Japanese Black pine (Pinus thunbergii). It is over one hundred years old and was donated to the garden in 1993 by Richard Yamasaki, who worked under Mr. Iida to install the garden landscape in 1960.

The seven-foot-tall stone wall behind the port town represents the foothills of the mountains. On top of the wall are evergreen azaleas. This area is a brilliant red focal point of the garden in April and May.

Walk back to the turn in the main path where the flagstone path begins, and take the gravel path to the top of the hill. Or, climb the steps you saw at the west end of the foothills.

On the hill above the north wall of the village harbor stands the Taihei-gata or Peace style lantern. It is a gift from Kobe, Seattle'ssister city that honors the friendship between the two cities. This lantern has cutout designs of the sun and moon on the firebox. In Japanese culture, the sun, moon, earth, fire, and water are the key elements of nature. From this viewpoint you can see the entire garden. Pause long enough to take in every aspect of this extraordinary view.

Continue along the path to the west, taking the path that heads away from the lake. You will pass through a grove of evergreen oaks (Quercus myrsinifolia) on your way to station six.

STATION SIX:

The concrete risers, which support the steps to the garden shelter, replicate the forms of log sections turned on end. Such log sections are traditionally used for steps in Japanese gardens, but log sections would disintegrate too rapidly in Seattle'smoist climate and under the garden's heavy foot traffic.

The azumaya, or garden shelter, provides for a moment of rest and reflection and can be a refuge from the rain. The entire garden and the hillside beyond is in view. The shelter is constructed of Japanese cedar(Cryptomeria japonica). Behind the azumaya is a grove of the same trees.

Notice that the four columns have been split with a vertical saw cut. This cut reduces the possibility of uncontrolled splitting from changes in temperature and humidity.

Early April is a festive time in Japan. Families and friends get together for hanami, flower viewing excursions with leisurely picnics that often continue well into the night. Many cities hold cherry blossom festivals, and Buddhist temples honor Hana Matsuri, or "Flower Festival," on April 8, the date recognized in Japan as the birthday of Buddha. The grove of cherry trees, flowering apricots, and crabapple trees below the shelter helps to recreate a sense of this tradition in our own garden from late-March to mid-April.

When designing the garden, Mr. Iida also used the practice of shakkei, or borrowing scenery. Here, the borrowed scenery is from the Arboretum visible beyond the garden proper. By including the hills and trees in the far distance, borrowed scenery suggests a larger garden than exists. Extended views of borrowed scenery of the hillside across the lake can be seen from the azumaya and as you walk toward the lake. Watch for the effects of borrowed scenery during the remainder of your tour.

STATION SEVEN:

Follow the path to the tsukimi dai, the moon-viewing platform at station seven. This is an excellent place to view the koi or Japanese carp, that populate the lake. They stay in the silt bottom during the winter and surface when spring approaches. A Moon-viewing event is held in the garden during the full moon of late summer. During this event traditional Japanese instruments are played at the tsukimi dai, where a stage is provided for the entertainers. The music of the koto and the shakuhachi enchant the audience as they relax around the lake and under the cherry trees.

In 1960, Crown Prince Akihito and Princess Michiko of Japan visited the garden and planted two trees: a Mt. Fuji "Shirotae" cherry and a white birch tree. The cherry tree was removed in 2002 because of storm damage and age, but the white birch (Betula pendula) planted on the lakeside of the path is still in the garden and marked with a special wooden plaque. The Crown Prince and Princess became Emperor and Empress of Japan in1989.

Please, continue along the path by the lakeside toward the teahouse.

STATION EIGHT:

This station includes the teahouse and the tea garden, the roji. The teahouse named Shoseian, "Arbor of the Murmuring Pines," was donated to the garden in 1959 by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and built in Tokyo by the Shimizu Construction Company. After a fire, it was rebuilt in 1981 with assistance from the Urasenke Foundation of Kyoto and the Arboretum Foundation. The teahouse and its garden are separated from the main garden by a composite hedge of boxwood, cedar, and pieris. Since this is a training area for the practice of tea, entry is only permitted during tea classes and demonstrations.

The tea garden, called roji, or "dewy ground ," is divided into two distinct parts. The outer garden features the koshikake machiai, the waiting area seen on your right. This is where tea guests wait before attending a formal tea gathering. Walk up to the bamboo gate and obser.ie the stepping stone path. Lattice bamboo fences and gates divide the outer garden from the sacred inner garden. Before a tea ceremony, the tea garden is thoroughly cleaned, the moss swept, and the stones and plants sprinkled with water to welcome the guest.

Return to the path and continue strolling southward. As you continue, notice the "boat-landing-stone" on your left. Stepping stones are placed here for the convenience of members of boating parties who want to come ashore.

You will walk past the crossing stones explored early in the tour. Stop the player for a few moments and listen to the soothing sounds of the watercourses. Look around slowly, taking in each view, near and far.

Walk up the stone steps on your right and from the path look into the tea garden. Benches in the open area under the roof provide seating for guests who are not accustomed to sitting on tatami mats.

Continue on the crushed rock path around to the right to view the teahouse and the roji from the rear. As you approach the rear of the teahouse, you can see a stone lantern across the garden, beyond the area covered by benches. Slightly to the left, in front of the lantern, is a small water basin, called a tsukubai. From a distance, it looks like a natural rock. Guests purify their hands and mouth at the basin before entering the teahouse.

Enjoy the calming sound of the waterfall and the peaceful quiet of this spot. Continue along until you come to another gate. From this point you can see the koshikake machiai, the waiting arbor on your left. There is a round footpath lantern, a maruashimoto, placed to light the paths between the waiting arbor and the teahouse. Just inside the bamboo gate and to the right is a delicate lace leaf maple. Turn around and retrace your way past the rear of the teahouse to the south end, where you will find a Northwest native tree, the vine maple set in the "Y" of the path. Go to the left here and proceed to station nine.

STATION NINE:

South of the tea garden, on your right, is a path to the waterfall. This is station nine. The stones in the path help to prepare you for the waterfall area by inviting you to climb the mountain. They serve the same purpose as the large flat rock placed under the roof of the entry gate to the garden, setting this area apart as a very special place. Mr. Iida carefully selected the large stones in the garden from Bandera Mountain in the Cascade Range. The 800 tons of stone were arranged to make them appear natural.

The largest rock in the garden, weighing eight and one-half tons, is backed with earth and forms the principal part of the rocky cliff over which the water falls. The stones in the falls are designed to be natural. Mr. Iida personally oversaw the original arrangement and installation of the rocks in and around the waterfall. In a 1974 article for Niwa, a journal for professional gardeners, Mr. Iida named this naturalistic fall as yokomi-no-taki, meaning that the water falls not from the front and center, but from the side. Peripheral views are important in Japanese gardens.

Below the waterfall, the alternating placement of the stones accentuates the cascading sound and movement of the water. The rocks are placed traditionally with two-thirds of the stone beneath the ground. Observe the moss ground cover and the use of ferns in this area. Notice the low kakuashi himoto-gata, a square footpath lantern. Garden lanterns like this one, with cutouts of the sun and moon, originated in temples and at one time provided a means of finding directions.

Cross the water by carefully moving on the large, flat stepping stones. If you pause midway and look over your right shoulder, you will see a multistoried stone tower in the forest above the waterfall. It suggests a distant monastery, high in the mountains.

Continue on this path until you return to the main garden path.

STATION TEN:

Walk toward the gently arching bridge: you are at Station ten. The bridge was built during the Franklin Delano Roosevelt presidency by the WPA (Works Projects Administration) and Mr. Iida chose to retain it.

Before crossing the bridge, take a short detour to your left for another view of the watercourse. Notice the lush planting along the stream. Return to the bridge and take a final look at the garden from this perspective. After crossing, take the path to the right. It leads back to the South Gate.

This concludes your tour. We invite you to return to the garden at different times of the year. Each season brings forth new colors, shapes, and fragrances, making every visit a refreshing experience.

This script was originally produced in April 1992 by Ellen Widmayer.

Revised in 2003 by Sue Clark.

Revised in 2008 by an Ad Hoc Committee of Arboretum Foundation Unit 86 volunteer members.