

Washington Park Arboretum

BULLETIN



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An Appreciation of the Japanese Garden

BY BARBARA ENGRAM

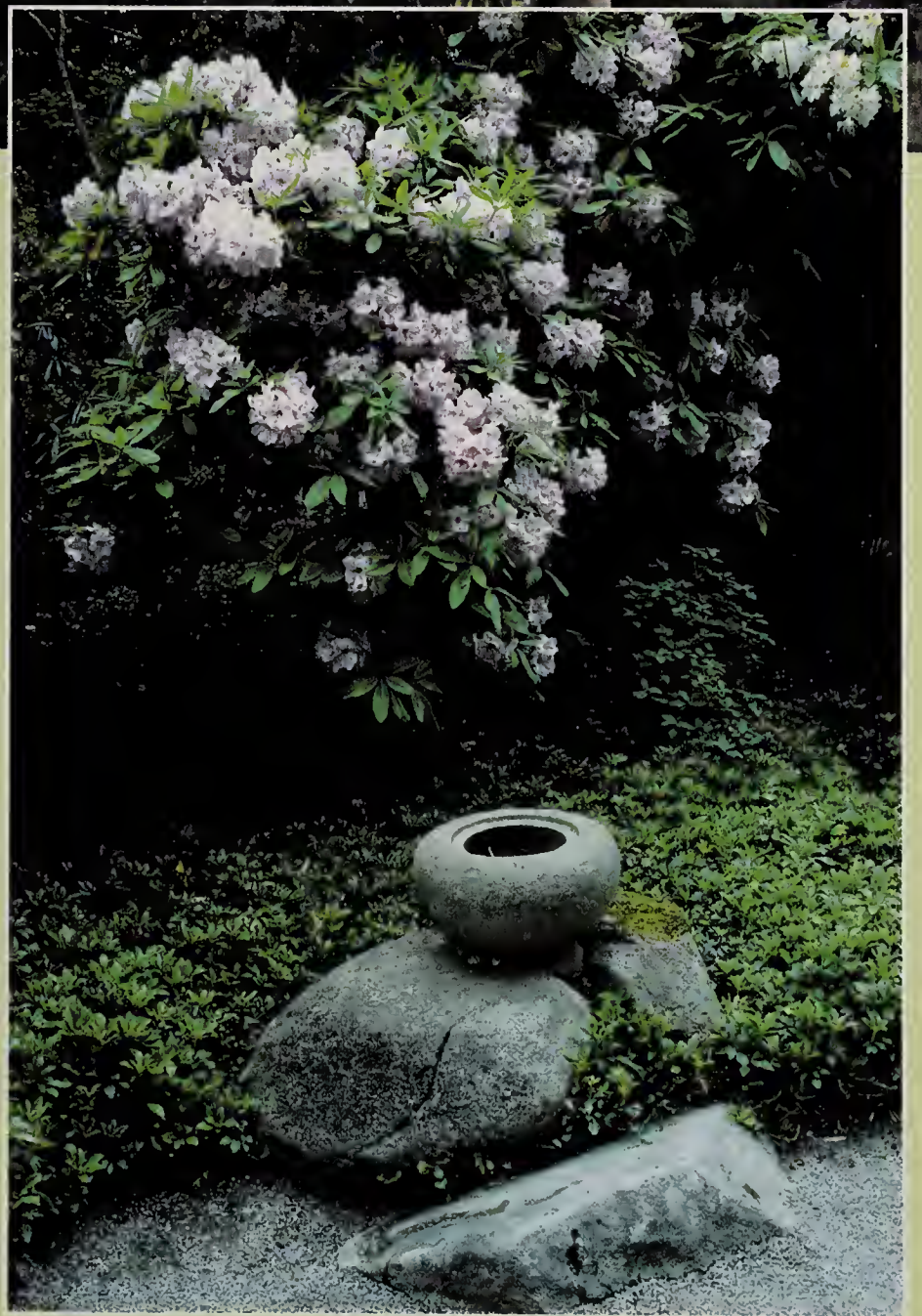
As Washington Park Arboretum celebrates its 75th anniversary, the Japanese Garden is getting ready for its 50th. Although it was not actually built until 1960, the Japanese Garden was at least a twinkle in some eyes right from the beginning. Records show that in 1937 the Arboretum Foundation invited the International Cultural Society of Japan to create a garden on a five-acre site and that the Society donated \$57,000 toward the project. It was

not until 20 years later, in 1957, that a team of four Japanese designers created the plan for the present garden as a gift from the Tokyo municipal government. The city of Tokyo also donated the original teahouse, which was built in Japan, dismantled, shipped to Seattle and reconstructed on site. Juki Iida, a member of the design team, came to Seattle to supervise the installation of the Garden in 1959-1960, and it was opened to the public on June 5, 1960.



The Japanese Garden is like—and unlike—the rest of the Arboretum. Like the Arboretum, it celebrates nature, and the plants within it are part of the collection that comprises the Arboretum. But it also differs in significant ways: The Arboretum is essentially a collection of plants for scientific study, and though the plants are placed in a beautiful naturalistic setting, it is not, strictly speaking, a garden. The Japanese Garden, on the other hand, focuses on and expresses design principles. Though it contains many plants native to Japan and typical of Japanese gardens, it is not these plants that make it what it is. It is a Japanese garden because it is designed according to principles that evolved over centuries in Japan.

At its heart, a Japanese garden expresses a culturally derived belief about the relation-



ship between humans and nature that differs greatly from that of western gardens. According to Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion, spirits reside in objects in nature. A magnificent stone, a monumental tree or a beautiful waterfall—each is revered as the abode of spirits or *kami*. Some of the earliest precursors of gardens in Japan were created when spaces around such objects were cleared, marked and cared for as sacred sites. Many other factors, of course, entered into the picture over the centuries, but the underlying reverence for nature remains.

An Ancient Gardening Text

This attitude is clearly expressed in the opening statements of the "Sakuteiki," a treatise almost 1000 years old and possibly the earliest work on gardening as an aesthetic expression. It opens with a listing of three basic concepts: The first advises the garden builder to "Select several places within the property according to the shape of the land and the ponds, and create a subtle atmosphere, *reflecting again and again on one's memories of wild nature.*" (Emphasis added.) The lay of the land dictates how the garden develops; the garden exists not as a shape imposed on nature, but as a form that flows from the contours and characteristics of the site and results from the cooperation of humans and nature, with nature as the guide and teacher. Our own Japanese Garden, for example, rests in a natural basin with the pond occupying the lowest level, as would occur in nature. Clearly, according to the "Sakuteiki," a garden exists as a representation of nature, or, more fully, as an expression of what we learn from nature—what we feel to be its essence. So here we see plants grouped informally, usually in odd numbers rather than in symmetrical compositions and even numbers, as is often the case in Western gardens.

The treatise goes on to add other principles, which are also as relevant today as when it was written: "When creating a garden, let

the exceptional work of past master gardeners be your guide. Heed the desires of the master of the house, yet heed as well one's own taste," a suggestion as helpful now as then, and "Visualize the famous landscapes of our country and come to understand their most interesting points. Re-create the essence of those scenes in the garden, but do so interpretively, not strictly." Our garden, for example, contains a beautiful stone peninsula, exactly like one in the imperial garden of Katsura in Kyoto, complete with an identical stone lantern at the end. This is not simply an unimaginative copying of the ideas of others. Remember that until very recently in history people did not travel as we do, and such replicas were sometimes the only way to remember or even to experience the beautiful scenes of other places. They were to citizens of the day what postcards or videos are to us—mementos of beautiful places and inspiring scenes.

Even though a garden might contain an almost exact replica of a scene from far away, more frequently the strategy is to interpret what we have learned from other gardens, and especially from wild nature, in our landscapes. So at the Japanese Garden, you will find ferns in shaded woodland areas and pines in sunny spots, often near the water. This not only makes aesthetic sense; it also leads to placing plants in spots where they will do well. In wild nature, plants fend for themselves; no human gardener comes around to mulch, fertilize, water and in general pamper them into surviving in their spot. Plants grow best in spots that meet their cultural needs, and the rule that one must put the right plant in the right place is one of nature's most important lessons. I think some of the serenity we experience in Japanese gardens results from this sense of "rightness"—of things being as they are in nature and of ourselves belonging to it.

People often speak of Japanese gardens as if they are all alike, but there are a number of different types of traditional Japanese gardens. The earliest ones appeared in the

ninth century C.E., during the Heian period; they derived from Chinese models and had large sand or gravel areas extending in front of residence audience halls. From either end of such halls, covered walkways jutted outward, flanking the sandy area and leading to pavilions from which one could view adjoining ponds and islands.

The *tsubo*, or courtyard garden fits into small areas between buildings in a residential complex or even in a niche within a house. Because of the small space occupied, a *tsubo* contains only a few plants and perhaps a stone or a simple water feature. Some contain just a stone composition and no plants at all—very much like tiny Zen gardens (see below). In these gardens, less truly is more.

The tea garden surrounds the teahouse; as visitors travel through the stages of that garden, from the outer to the inner areas, they symbolically move farther away from the outside world and more deeply into the inner world of the spirit. Our own tea garden has an outer garden with a covered structure where guests sit and wait to be summoned for the ceremony. Stepping-stones lead to a gate in the inner garden that contains the teahouse. Sitting in the outer garden, the guest begins to leave the outer world behind; moving through the simple bamboo gate, the guest symbolically leaves the outer world for the world of the tea ceremony. Both inner and outer tea gardens are very simple and evoke the image of remote woodlands deep in the heart of nature, far away from the bustle of humans.

The Zen garden's austere compositions of stone and gravel support meditation developed during a time when Japan was ruled by the warrior class. The Zen concepts of inner control and serenity held special appeal for those in power. The ability, fostered by meditation, to detach oneself from the stresses at hand could prove invaluable in combat. The lack of embellishment in these gardens reflected the strong and austere spirit of the warrior. One can hardly imagine a Japanese

garden without stone, and in the Zen garden, where stone often represents water and islands, the stone garden finds its purest form.

The Advent of Strolling Gardens

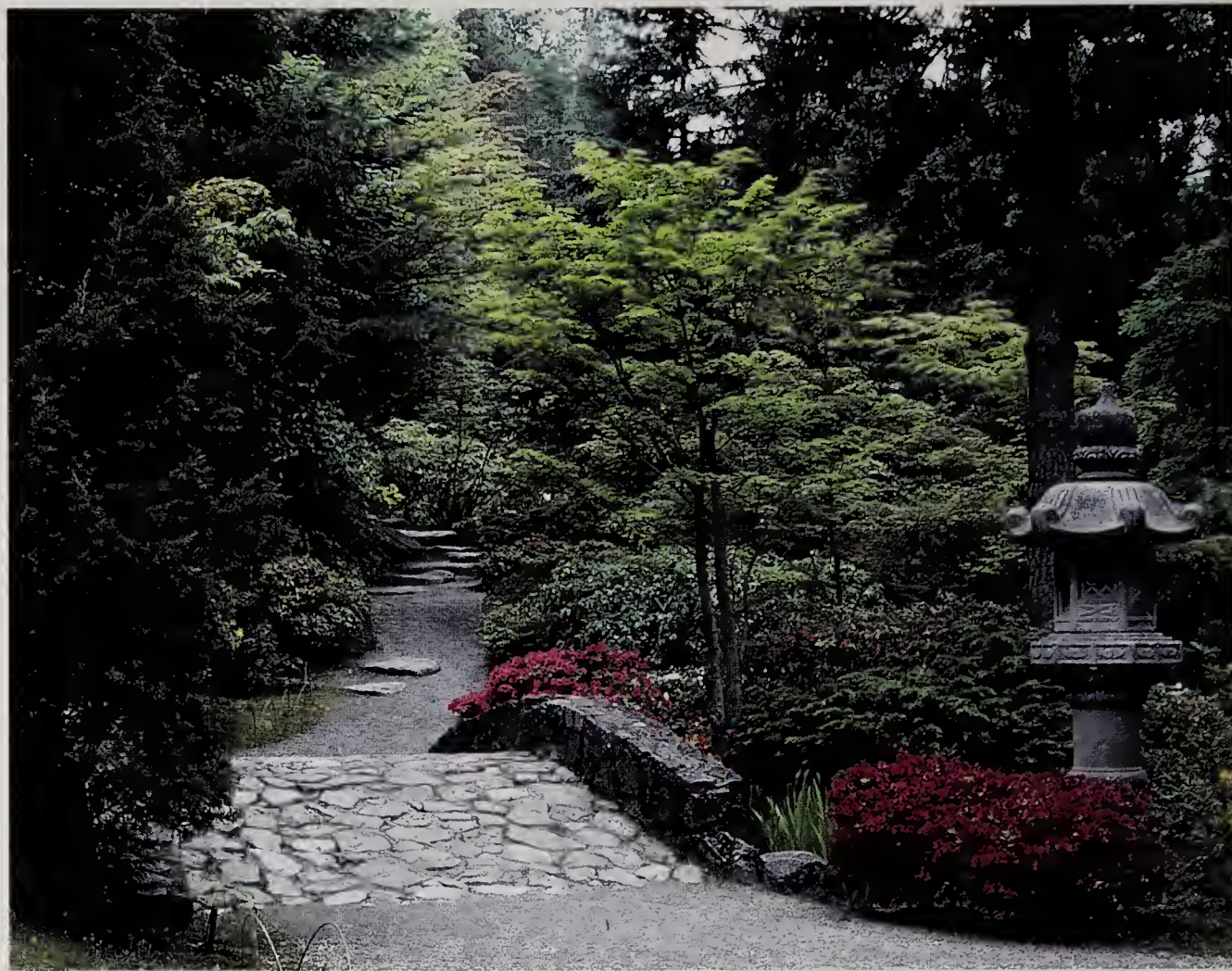
Our Japanese Garden is a stroll garden, of the type that arose during the Momoyama period in Japan (1568-1600). These were large gardens that developed on the estates of the landed gentry. This period of Japanese history was one of relative peace, with the result that estates were passed from one generation to the next without the destruction that accompanies warfare. Gardens were built and enlarged, and neighboring lands were annexed, resulting in gardens much greater in size than in previous eras. Until that time, gardens were built for viewing from within the residence or from porches that overlooked them. For instance, one enters the Zen garden only for maintenance—to clean and rake gravel, a simple and repetitive task that can, in itself, be meditative. The small *tsubo* gardens are viewed primarily from various rooms of the house, or from covered walkways joining different buildings. One did pass through a tea garden, using a stone pathway, but only as a symbolic journey away from the cares of the outside world and into the world of tea.

But as estates—and the gardens they contained—grew larger, the garden became a place to enter. One strolled through it on meandering pathways, and often, upon rounding a turn or passing through a gate, experienced new and unexpected vistas. Different parts of the garden represented different areas in nature, and a visit to the garden symbolized a journey. Overall, the stroll garden owes much of its design aesthetic to the tea garden, and stroll gardens often contain one or more teahouses with their associated gardens.

At the main gate to our Japanese Garden, you first enter the “forest.” As you walk along the path, rhododendrons, maples and other trees rise above you. On the right is a *kare*

san sui, or dry stream bed—a feature reminiscent of stone and gravel Zen gardens in that it evokes a water scene without actually using water. (Though this stream was constructed as a dry garden, it is placed at the lowest level in its area, so that in times of heavy rain and occasional flooding it becomes an actual stream, emptying into the garden’s pond—a bit of proof that the original designers did well their job of imitating nature.) At the fork in the path, moving to the left leads to the “mountain” area, a hill containing the largest stone in the garden placed next to the highest waterfall. Water cascades down the hillside and into the pond. The right fork of the path leads along the east side of the garden through the “forest” and finally opens up to a view of the pond that represents the sea. On the left you see the stone peninsula that represents the one at Katsura imperial villa, described earlier, and across the water, the teahouse, the orchard and the moon-viewing platform.

Far across the pond, tucked beneath trees on a hillside near the west boundary of the garden, is a small rustic structure, the *ayzumaya*. Many stroll gardens include such primitive structures, where one can rest and view the garden. Most consist of a simple roof protecting a bench and are constructed using unpolished, rustic materials. In our structure, the construction of the roof is revealed, the posts are made of cedar trunks stripped of bark, and the sides are open to views in all directions. From the *ayzumaya*, one looks over the pond and sees the eastern gate and the hillside of the Arboretum beyond. This is a classic example of *shakkei*, or “borrowed scenery”—a Japanese technique for enlarging the sense of the garden, and an approach often used in Northwest gardens to incorpo-



rate views of surrounding mountains and lakes.

As you continue along the eastern pathway, you reach the eastern gate. Located at roughly the center of the pond on the eastern boundary of the garden, this gate was actually planned to be the garden’s main entrance, but lack of space for a ticket booth or parking led to the decision to move the entrance to its present location at the south end. Entering from the eastern gate, the visitor would first see formal, upright pine trees and two bridges leading across the lake to the west side of the garden, with the teahouse and its garden on the far left. Farther from the gate, the forms of the pine trees change to informal, irregularly twisted shapes. Typically, in Japanese garden designs, formal plantings are placed near areas of human use and habitation; as one moves farther away from human-dominated space, the plantings and design become increasingly naturalistic and informal in style.

To the north of the bridges is Turtle Island, named for a traditional style of island in Japanese gardens, not for the turtles which are usually seen sunning themselves on the stones at the island’s edges. Near Turtle Island, a tall lantern stands in the water to mark the entrance to the areas that evoke a harbor and

a village at the north end of the garden. The stones at the pond's edge change at this point—from naturally shaped stones laid in irregular lines to dressed stones in straight lines, indicating that one has left the world of nature and entered the world of humans. The original plans for the Japanese Garden called for a pavilion at the top of the hill at the north end, commanding a panoramic view of the garden and the teahouse.* In a traditional Japanese estate, this would have been the site of the family's residential complex, commanding the best view of the gardens; in a village, it would be the spot occupied by the local ruler.

A Japanese stroll garden is meant to be experienced at leisure. It offers the opportunity to enter nature, to move slowly, pause,

leave the outer world and enter the garden. So, by all means, come to the Arboretum's Japanese Garden to stroll and see the rhododendrons and azaleas in the spring, the wisteria in early summer and the maples in fall. But come also to step into another world, another time, another place. Experience the world of the garden as a place where spirits abide. ∞

BARB ENGRAM received a degree in landscape design from Edmonds Community College and attended seminars on Japanese garden design in Kyoto. She has volunteered at the Arboretum for 15 years, both as a guide and as a leader of workshops on pruning maples and pines. She works as a landscape designer, consultant and project manager.

* Steve Garber, chair of the Japanese Garden Advisory Council notes: "The pavilion is the sole remaining part of the original garden plan that remains unbuilt, but it is the Advisory Council's goal to realize its construction in the years ahead."



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