

CHINESE GARDEN DETAILS

Elements & Symbolism

By Harriet A. Henderson

As the fountainhead of Japanese garden design, China has contributed a centuries-old legacy to its neighboring country. While Chinese and Japanese gardens share many design elements and much traditional symbolism, each country has developed a distinctive tradition. Both types of gardens are attempts to create an idealized view of nature, composed with rocks, water (or its symbolic Zen counterpart, sand), and plants. However, Chinese gardens are generally filled with an abundance of all these design features, in contrast to a more restrained Japanese palette. Chinese gardens also differ in the type of paving and rocks, and in the strong architectural presence of walls, courtyards and pavilions. Like Japanese gardens, Chinese gardens are appreciated as retreats for quiet contemplation, but they are also enjoyed as places for studying, poetry, listening to music, drinking wine and entertaining friends.

Paths

Chinese gardens unfold as densely layered scroll paintings, with paths winding through walled courtyards, around rock masses, under covered passageways, and across bridges to give the visitor glimpses of a pond and buildings, while suggesting a much larger landscape. Linking all of the garden spaces are different types of stone and tile paving, including intricate mosaics of pebbles in the courtyards. The small rounded stones form various patterns, ranging from geometric designs to representations of traditional subjects such as the crane (symbolizing long life), the bat (representing good luck) or floral vases.

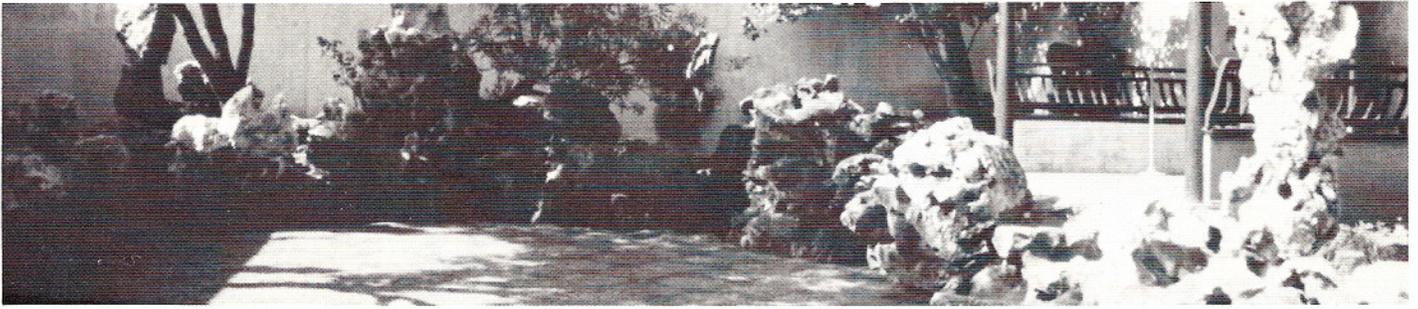
Rocks

Rocks are the backbone of both Japanese and Chinese gardens, but the type of rock selected is unique to each country. In China, rocks are used to create a sense of being in a craggy mountain wilderness. Echoing the natural landscapes of Guilin, where vertical peaks rise abruptly from the plain, limestone rocks are placed in an upright position with a top heavy mass poised over a narrow base. Prized rocks have rugged contours and are riddled with openings and hollows, which suggest overhanging cliffs or imply passage through a cavern. The rocks are used to form a mountain mass, or as a vertical sculptural element against a wall. In contrast, Japanese rocks are positioned with the narrower top sloping to a broader base, giving the effect of repose and stability while suggesting mountains or islands.

Chinese garden pavilion featuring rocks, water, shrubs and trees in the Master of Nets Garden, Suzhou.



HENDERSON PHOTOS



Walls

Chinese gardens are also characterised by the frequent use of walls, covered walkways and pavilions, which link the cluster of buildings and lead the visitor through the garden. Walls form courtyards for the buildings, define different parts of the garden, provide backdrops for plant or rock silhouettes and create an element of surprise by directing paths and views. The walls are often whitewashed or painted shades of grey, beige, maize or terracotta and they are capped with grey or colored tiles. Openings in the walls form intriguing doorways and windows and they are typically in traditional shapes such as the moon (symbolizing perfection), flowers, fans, shells, gourds or vases. Intricate latticework or filligree designs often fill the window spaces, creating interesting patterns while giving a sense of depth. Covered walkways, with wood latticework eaves and balustrades, link vermilion buildings and extend into the garden by leading to pavilions or across bridges. Attached or free-standing pavilions located by the pond provide seating at the water's edge, and focus attention on important views in the garden.

Stone paving featured in the Lion's Grove Garden, Suzhou.



Plants

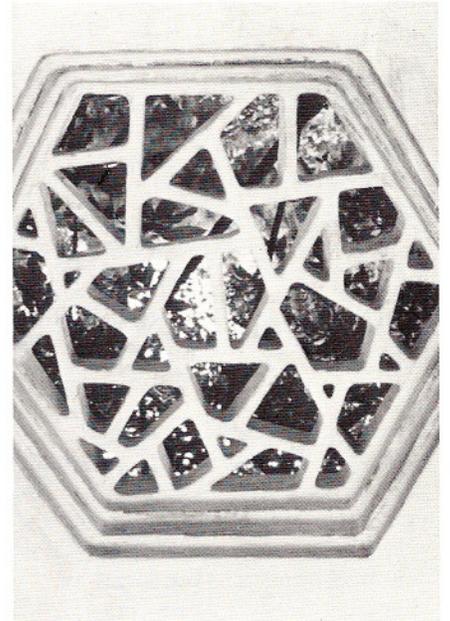
In Chinese gardens, paving, rocks and architectural elements seem to predominate, but plants are important to mark the passing of the season, to evoke symbolic associations and to contrast with the hard edges of paving, rocks and walls. Paulownia, Sophora and Catalpa trees are frequently planted to provide shade, while Weeping willows are chosen to enhance a lake's edge. In courtyards, Pine (symbolizing longevity), Red cedar, bamboo (symbolizing courage) and Banana trees form striking silhouettes against tile capped walls.

Favorite fruit trees are the Persimmon, Peach (symbolizing spring and marriage), and Pear (symbolizing purity), Magnolia and Crabapple. To extend the seasonal color, flowering shrubs such as the Camellia (symbolizing prosperity), Tree peony (symbolizing wealth and honor), Pomegranate and Quince are selected. The Lotus (symbolizing quiet virtue), Wisteria, Iris and Peony are also prized for their blooms.

For their additional interest penjing (Chinese bonsai) and potted flowering plants such as the Chrysanthemum (symbolizing longevity) are often grown in a separate area, to be brought out for display near an entrance or in a courtyard. As a further link between China and Japan, many of these Chinese plants are grown in Japanese gardens for their beauty and traditional meanings.

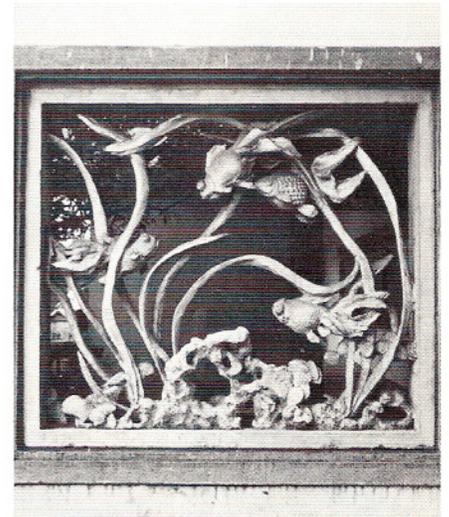


Pavilion and courtyard featuring typical Chinese stone arrangement and the sparse use of plants in the Master of Nets Garden, Suzhou.



Geometric latticework featured in a window in the Master of Nets Garden, Suzhou.

Goldfish featured in a window in the Jade Fountain Garden, Hangzhou.



Limestone rock featured in the Lion's Grove Garden, Suzhou.