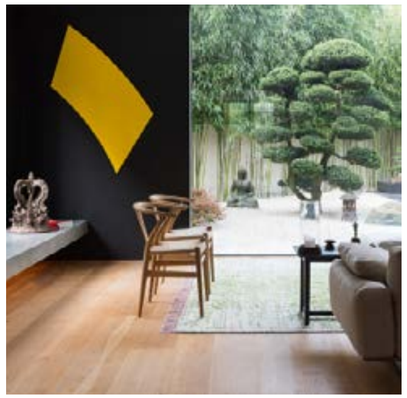


GREEN AND SERENE

The eastern ethos of serenity is taking root in European gardens in new and enlightening ways, as Japanese landscaping traditions cross-pollinate with the west's take on mindfulness and meditation, says **Amy Bradford**

Few design watchers can have failed to notice the popularity of Japanese style in recent years – its pared-back sensibility is the yin to modern maximalism's yang, one might say. Recently, the focus has turned to the country's impressive garden tradition. Zen is a talking point once again as a book by British landscape designer Sophie Walker, *The Japanese Garden*, brings its ancient practices to life.

Formal Japanese gardens present a challenge to the western viewer because, while they appear to be perfectly serene, complex layers of meaning are hidden beneath the surface. These gardens do not exist simply to be looked at or sat out in – they are intended to stimulate the mind as well as the eye. "The experience of being in a Japanese garden subtly infuses the viewer with a sense of the processes of change and renewal," says Robert Ketchell, former chairman of the Japanese Garden Society, which enables British enthusiasts to indulge their passion for oriental horticulture. "Your engagement is key. Many contemporary western gardens have lost sight of this and are more concerned with display."

One consequence of this philosophical richness is that the Japanese expect gardens to be active all year round. The notion that the gardener should submit to a fallow period in winter is anathema, as is the summer-oriented concept of a lawn edged with flowerbeds. Many different types of garden have been cultivated in Japan over the centuries – notably the tea garden, organised around the teahouse and *chado* ceremony, and the dry *karesansui* rock garden, dominated by gravel and carefully placed stones. But most have one thing in common: they have

Right: Marc Meiré's *karesansui* dry courtyard garden in Cologne. Above: Meiré's house, with its modern Asian decor has a dedicated meditation room and Zen garden

developed alongside Zen Buddhism, from which much of their symbolism and poetic thoughtfulness derives.

The idea of recreating Japanese gardens in the west is, thus, fraught with the risk of cultural blunders; one can so easily mistake a revered object – such as the dimly lit lantern representing a long-departed patriarch – for a mere ornament. However, there is much to gain from seeing nature through Japanese eyes, forearmed with knowledge of why their gardens look the way they do.

Japan's gardens seek to emulate its wild, mountainous landscape in miniature, reflecting the Buddhist ideal of voyaging out into the wilderness and taking solace in nature. A perfect example is the Adachi Museum garden (pictured right), opened in 1970 in the city of Yasugi and featured in Sophie Walker's book (£49.95, Phaidon). Its ingenious winding vistas and sense of perspective create the illusion of immense space and height. "Relatively small *niwaki*-pruned pine trees take on stature as wild ancient trees," writes Walker. "The gently curving hills take on the status of vast landscapes."

As in many Japanese gardens, gravel raked into graceful patterns stands in for fast-flowing water. This is no mere practical substitute, explains cultural historian Yoko Kawaguchi, author of *Japanese Zen Gardens* (£17.99, Frances Lincoln). "It's a metaphor for the transience of time," she says. "It gives the idea of movement and a sense of permanence too."

Many early Japanese gardens were influenced by Chinese ink-brush paintings brought to Buddhist temples in ancient times, resulting in a restrained palette that's still used today: there is a preference for greenery over flowers and subtle variations in tone that evoke light and shadow. The 15th-century Funda-in temple garden in Kyoto is planted with a traditional mix of pine trees, moss and rocks and is seen through the sliding doors and windows of a teahouse, which compose the view as a frame does around a painting.

Similarly green – but designed to be walked around – is the 19th-century Tairyu-Sanso garden, also in Kyoto. It surrounds a villa built by architect Kanetsune Ijuin and has a pond, teahouse and water mill, all of which provide different viewpoints to admire a small-scale forest. "The emphasis on green plants dates back to the 16th century, when tea master Sen no Rikyū brought evergreen broadleaf trees such as oaks into the tea garden," says Kawaguchi. "He thought of these gardens as hermitages up in the hills. This is why Japanese gardens look so multidimensional – there are evergreens in leaf all year round and deciduous species that mark the passing of the seasons."

Perhaps where the Japanese garden tradition differs most from its European counterpart is in its approach to flowers, which are a much rarer presence. Certain flowers are used in planting schemes, but chiefly as

Japan's gardens seek to emulate the country's wild, mountainous landscapes in miniature

From top: the Adachi Museum garden in Yasugi, pictured in *The Japanese Garden* by Sophie Walker. Roberto Silva's show garden in Nagasaki introduced tropical motifs to a Japanese stone garden

symbols of the fleetingness of life – the *Camellia japonica*, for instance, whose blooms fall not petal by petal but whole in one short, dramatic seasonal event. Each spring at the 15th-century Taizō-in temple garden in Kyoto, cherry trees briefly unfurl canopies of pink blossom over austere *karesansui* dry landscaping. When the blossom falls, however, the black branches of the tree are as striking as ever. "Trees are always pruned in such a way that when they lose their leaves, the trunks form a beautiful silhouette," says Kawaguchi. Pruning, known as *niwaki*, is regarded as an artform in itself.

The Japanese way of gardening chimes with current trends for mindfulness, meditation and slow living. "In Japan, people tend to engage in the sustained, lifelong practice of skills known as *shugyo*," says Walker. "They dedicate their life to learning an art – be it gardening, *ikebana* or calligraphy. You never learn it in full, of course, but it's the experience that counts, and it's seen as a useful tool for life." The concept of geomancy, like Chinese feng shui, also links the habit of gardening to spiritual enlightenment, adds Walker. "It states that by tying

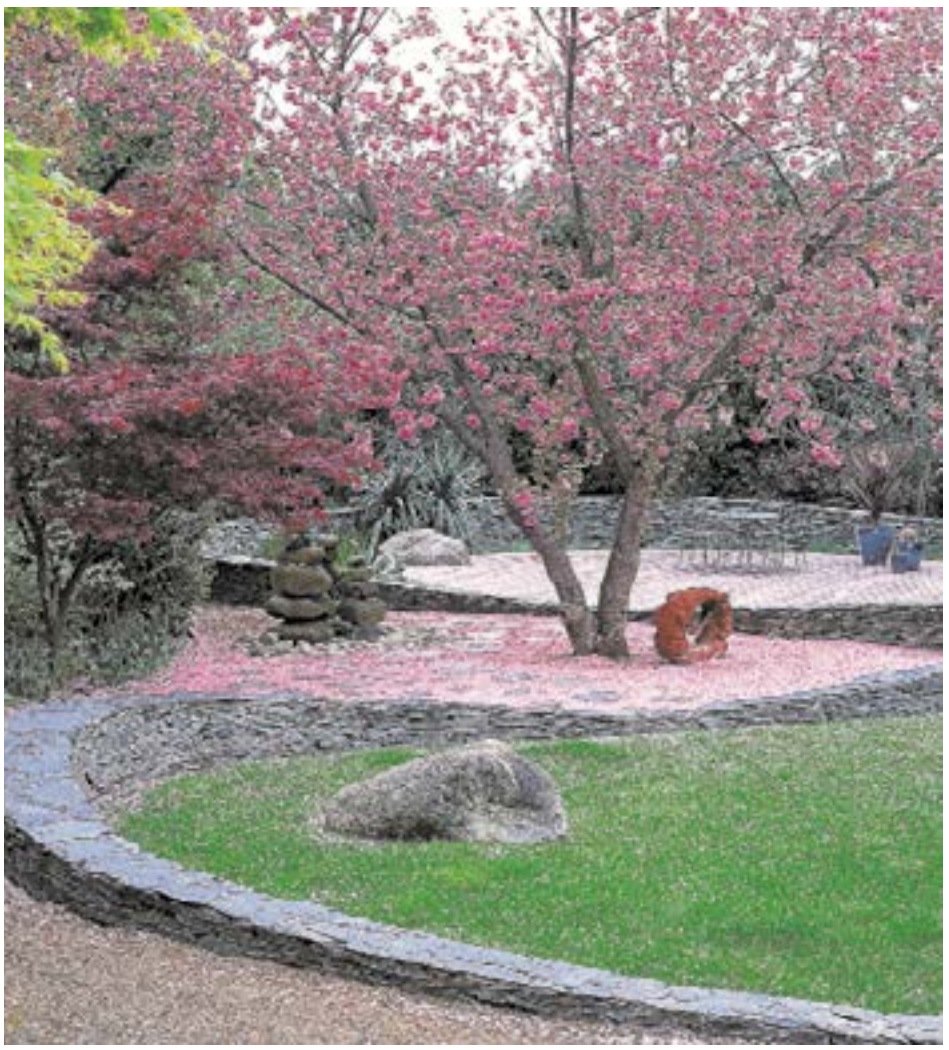
"The whole idea is to create spaces that evoke calm and the feeling of being in nature"

ourselves to the land in a particular way, in alignment with all aspects of nature, people's wellbeing is enhanced."

With environmental degradation all around us, thinking of the garden in this way also has ethical implications. For the Japanese horticulturalist, care for the environment is paramount, which comes through in the use of local materials. "Most Japanese gardens use local stones and replicate nature, so they aren't damaging to the environment," says Brazilian-born, London-based garden designer Roberto Silva, who is strongly inspired by Japanese landscaping. "They also tend to use perennials rather than annuals, so they don't need replanting yearly."

Silva's gardens are a masterclass in adapting oriental ideas for a western audience, fusing traditional features with elements borrowed from contemporary art and a South American's flair for hot colour. His show garden in Nagasaki (pictured on previous page) introduced tropical motifs to a Japanese stone garden, palm trees and an Yves Klein-blue water feature forming a dramatic contrast to the hard landscaping. This design represents Silva at his most exuberant, but he takes an equally skilful approach to British residential settings.

In his Foster Garden (pictured right) in suburban London, a slate wall inspired by the sculpture of Andy Goldsworthy snakes around the plot, recalling the winding paths that lead to viewing points in old temple gardens. "I am not a purist," Silva says. "In this garden, the boulders on the ground and the cherry and acer trees are very Japanese, but they are mixed with architectural



Left: Roberto Silva's Foster garden in suburban London features a snaking slate wall reminiscent of the winding paths in old Japanese temple gardens

elements and the pretty colours of English gardens." When the cherry blossom falls, it carpets an area of grey cobbles and forms a blazing contrast with the purple acer foliage.

In his Belsize Park garden, Silva shows that it's possible to combine Japanese serenity with an English lawn. A Zen-style stone water feature sits at one end of the grass and is mounted on a plinth made of cobbles and salvaged railway sleepers. "I love the way Japanese gardens use boulders and stones, and the asymmetry of their designs," he says. "The whole idea is to create spaces that evoke calm and the feeling of being in nature. I think their approach can work very well with our own woodland-style gardens."

Moving to Cologne, the Japanese Zen garden is sensitively translated to a European setting at the home of Marc Meiré (pictured on opening pages), co-founder of creative agency Meiré und Meiré. His house is decorated in a modern Asian style and incorporates a *karesansui* dry courtyard garden he designed. It's planted with bamboo – whose upright stems represent, in Buddhist terms, rightness of mind – and "cloud-pruned" trees, with a contemporary decked seating area and pool to one side.

Meiré is a seasoned practitioner of meditation. "In Japan, I discovered how the art of raking gravel aids concentration," he says. "I bought a rake in Kyoto and use it to create patterns in my own garden. It's a simple and immediate way of calming my mind." He loves the "clarity and tidiness" of Zen gardens. "There is no clutter or decoration, which I find very soothing," he says.

Above right: a garden in Sevenoaks, Kent, designed by The Japanese Garden Centre

Those who wish to learn more about Japanese gardens in a meaningful context could join the Japanese Garden Society (annual membership from £30), which organises trips to gardens in Japan and the US as well as holding events in the UK. Another useful resource is Niwaki, based in Wiltshire and run by Jake Hobson, an expert in *niwaki* pruning. As well as beautiful handmade garden tools, he sells mature pruned trees (from £2,400) that are widely available in Japan but harder to find in the UK, including evergreen oaks, cypress and black pines. For everything from teahouses to bridges and landscape garden design (example pictured above), Kent-based The Japanese Garden Centre is also worth a visit (and has an online store).

Anyone preparing to populate their plot with manicured trees, rocks and moss might first consider that the Japanese way of gardening involves more than just green fingers, as Walker has learnt from her oriental sojourns. "We need to rethink the potential of gardens, as spaces of discovery and wonder. They can reveal something to us about nature that we have lost touch with." ✦

BUDDHISTS AND BLOOMS

The Japanese Garden Centre, 01622-872 403; buildajapanesegarden.com. **Japanese Garden Society,** 0345-094 4584; jgs.org.uk. **Meiré und Meiré,** meireundmeire.com. **Niwaki,** 01747-445 059; niwaki.com. **Roberto Silva,** 020-7688 0935; silvalandscapes.com. **Sophie Walker Studio,** 020-7622 4361; sophiewalkerstudio.com.

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