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Photo by Genevieve J. Essig



Traditional Chinese gardens present a challenge in Florida. See page 26.

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ON THE COVER

There is beauty in abundance at Valkaria Tropical Gardens. See page 12. (Photo by Kathy Nelson)



Photo by John A. Starnes

'Abraham Darby' is one great, fragrant rose for Florida gardens. See page 32.

The Classical Chinese Garden

by Frederick B. Essig

China is one of the largest countries on earth as well as one of the oldest continuous civilizations, and gardening has been an integral part of its culture for thousands of years. There are vegetable gardens and fruit orchards, the medicinal gardens of scholars and doctors, and modern botanical gardens. But in 2 memorable visits to China, I have come to greatly admire the traditional Chinese private garden. Built by the wealthy upper class purely for pleasure, they have become a highly-stylized art form.

The private garden was relatively small and intimate,



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Visitors to an ancient garden in Suzhou cross over a koi pond on a narrow, zigzag stone bridge.

designed as a peaceful refuge from the stresses of daily life. It was built adjacent to the residence of a wealthy merchant or government official. Even the owners of large estates carved out smaller areas to serve this purpose. The magnificent Forbidden City in Beijing, residence of Chinese emperors for 5 centuries, is dominated by massive open squares and imposing imperial edifices, but around the periphery are numerous small private garden areas.

The classical Chinese garden consists of 4 essential elements: architecture, water, rocks, and plants. While we usually think of landscaping as something that goes around the outside of a

building, the Chinese garden occupies a courtyard-like area within an architectural frame of covered walkways, walls, and pavilions. The dominant element is a small pond, or a series of connected ponds, filled with koi. Around the pond, rocks are piled in various configurations to resemble natural outcrops or even small mountains. Plants are placed naturalistically, and somewhat sparingly, within this miniature scenery of lakes and mountains.

The architectural element serves as a frame around the garden. The whole is typically separated from neighboring properties by a high wall, while a covered walkway provides a way to stroll around the central landscape and view it from different angles. Open-sided pavilions, or "tings" of various sizes, and sometimes larger



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Lotus is the most esteemed aquatic plant in Chinese gardens.

halls, provide space for entertaining guests or other leisure activities. Smaller tings serve as resting stations and rain shelters.

The characteristic Chinese architectural style incorporates tile roofs with upturned and ornamented corners, fine lattice-work on railings, walls and doorways, and sculptures of symbolically significant or lucky animals - most commonly lions, cranes, dragons, deer, tortoises, and phoenixes. Decorative doors and windows lead from one section of the garden to another while framing the view beyond. Bridges (usually flat and built in a zigzag configuration), may provide a shortcut across the pond as well as more ways to view the garden. The zigzag bridge was believed to keep out evil spirits that could move only in a straight line.

Desirably-shaped rocks, expensive and hard to obtain, were



photo by Frederick B. Essig

The pendulous form of the Chinese scholar tree lends rounded, cloud-like shapes to traditional gardens.

traditionally valued most highly of all the elements in the garden. Most esteemed are limestones with intricate holes, caves, and tunnels that symbolize the dwelling places of ancestral spirits. The most famous are the tai hu (Lake Tai) stones. Huge tai hu boulders were often transported hundreds of miles at great expense. Collecting expensive stones became an obsession with the wealthy class and scholars alike - and the ruin of many. "Petromania" even contributed to the downfall of a few empires.

Sometimes, exquisitely-shaped stones provide the centerpiece of a penjing. Penjing means "potted scenery." Classical penjing, precursor to the Japanese bonsai, incorporates not only dwarfed plants but also select rocks to represent mountains, and sometimes even tiny water features. Placed outdoors in a garden, a penjing literally becomes a "land-

scape within a landscape."

Plants represent a relatively small component of traditional gardens. This may seem strange to modern plant collectors, but botanical novelty was not an objective. Far more important to the classical gardener was the symbolic association of plants with Chinese culture, history, and literature.

Many plants were considered lucky. Loaded with cultural symbolism, lotus (*Nelumbo*) is almost obligatory in Chinese gardens. Lotus leaves and flowers originate from rhizomes in the mud below the water; as they rise into the air, dirt and debris roll off. This symbolizes the human struggle to rise above the mundane and find enlightenment, becoming pure in the clean air above.

Virtually everything else in the garden - plants, rocks, and koi - has a comparable story. Symbolic associations of objects with luck and human virtue are an integral part of traditional Chinese culture that helps provide order and guidance for individual lives and society.



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Pinus bungeana is valued for its multi-colored bark.

Another level of meaning in the garden is compositional. The traditional Chinese garden is a 3-dimensional, interactive piece of art. Plants are used to accent the stonework, as individual specimens, or to form miniature forests among simulated mountains.

Pines with multi-color bark (*P. bungeana*, *P. tabulaeformis*), junipers (*Juniperus chinensis*), Chinese thuja (*Platycladus*), *Podocarpus*, ginkgo trees, bamboos, and Chinese scholar trees (*Sophora japonica* var *pendula*), are common "forest" elements in traditional gardens. In addition, there are numerous flowering and accent ornamentals, including water lilies, roses, redbud, ixora, hydrangea, oleander, paulownia, crape myrtle, jasmine, peonies, plums, wisteria, liriopse, camellias, chrysanthemums, peonies, azaleas, lilacs, hibiscus, windmill palms, and magnolias. Edible and otherwise useful plants, such as citrus, tea, rice and soybeans, occur only incidentally in private gardens.



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Doorways and windows of varied shapes serve as picture frames for adjacent garden elements.

Can we build Chinese traditional gardens in our Florida yards? In ancient times they were the hobby of the rich, and they remain so today. Authentic Chinese architecture is expensive, and importing big chunks of porous limestone from Lake Tai will also relieve you of a chunk of change. There may be oppor-

tunities, though, to support a Chinese garden within a local city park or botanical garden.

We can also be creative and use the core elements of traditional Chinese gardens to forge our own styles. Create a quiet enclosed space using rock or other natural building materials around a small fish pond (or even a swimming pool or hot tub), forming a naturalistic landscape (lose the lawn!) within any sort of architectural framework. The important thing is to artistically combine water, rocks, architec-



photo by Frederick B. Essig

A pomegranate tree on the grounds of a temple provides beauty as well as fruit.

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Seattle -

www.seattlechinesegarden.org/

New York -

www.sibg.org/cg.html

Vancouver -

www.vancouverchinesegarden.com/

Sydney, Australia -

www.chinesegarden.com.au/

tural elements, and plants to create a special place where you can dine, entertain, or just think. In the meantime, enjoy your camellias, crape myrtles, and citrus blossoms, and think about where they came from.

An Associate Professor of Biology at USF in Tampa, Dr. Essig wrote about the silver trumpet tree in our Feb/Mar 07 issue.

SUGGESTED READING

*Ancient Chinese Architecture:
Private Gardens*, Liyao Cheng
*The Chinese Garden: History,
Art, and Architecture*,
Maggie Keswick
The Garden Plants of China,
Peter Valder