

Learnings from Kyoto

In April I realised a life long dream of going to Japan. Since I started a career in gardening and garden design a few years ago, I have been in awe of the Japanese for their craft, precision and attention to detail specifically within naturalistic, zen and moss gardens.

So this Spring I was lucky enough to take part in a pilot 5 day training programme in Kyoto, organised and lead by landscaping firm Ueyakato landscapes. They are a family run business going back 8 generations that is hoping to spread Kyoto's rich history of gardening knowledge and craftsmanship accumulated over 1200+ years.

This year Ueyakato launched a training programme to teach traditional Japanese gardening techniques to non Japanese speaking foreigners and thanks to the financial support of the Princes Trust, the Japanese Garden Society and Great Dixter, I was able to get involved.

The course focused largely on borrowed scenery (Kyoto is surrounded by mountains) and waterfall construction methods, however there are a number of general design techniques common in Japanese gardens that can be used to create depth and dynamism in any space. I have summarised these below:



40% of a garden is in the design, 60% is in the ongoing aftercare.

The biggest mistake we can make is to lose that sense of initial excitement during the design process as the garden matures. The phrase 'garden maintenance' is unhelpful as it incorrectly implies that gardens are static. 'Fostering' or 'stewardship' are more accurate, as they convey the craft and dedication required to realise a garden's potential over a period of many years.

Each garden has a unique orientation - work specifically to that.

You may not have a mountain view that you can bring into the garden, but what are the 'borrowed' trees and sight lines that you want to work to 'frame' vs unwanted buildings, telephone poles etc that you want to screen? This may well be a longer term project but it is very important to factor this in to the design process. Many of the Japanese gardens we visited are very good at hiding neighbouring buildings to create the illusion that the garden is part of the landscape beyond. Hiding boundaries and buildings in this way also makes the space feel much larger than it is.



Work to engage the 5 senses in interesting ways.

For example a path with stones uneven in height and size provokes a tactile response as you move through it. The sound of trickling water evokes a mountain stream. Partly concealing a garden feature (acers are frequently used to conceal waterfalls) will create a sense of intrigue that draws you through the space.



Place larger objects closer to the house to create depth.

Just as an artist uses fainter lines to evoke distance, you can make a space feel much larger than it is with strategic placement. This is effectively demonstrated at Murin- An (one of my favourite gardens from the trip), where larger boulders and trees are positioned at the front of the garden, with smaller boulders and specimens towards the back.

Combine different landscape archetypes.

In Kyoto, gardens often evoke a village at the foot of a mountain transitioning to a mountain forest as you move away from the house. They achieve this through plant selection, positioning, density and pruning techniques. This 'naturalistic' approach of recreating a natural scene could be applied to a garden in the UK for example with a woodland edge transitioning into grassland, or a coastal area transitioning into heathland.

Finally, we were often reminded that 'setting a stone will never surpass the landscapes of nature'. The president of the Ueyakato Landscapes believes it would take 200 years to become a true garden craftsmen. In other words, naturalism is a life long pursuit and an art form that is never truly completed or achieved, so stay humble!

If anyone would like to know more about the trip, or is interested in applying to next years program, I'd be more than happy to discuss further.

My email is theo@wilderlandscapes.co.uk

