



U.S.-Japan Relations

Arts & Culture

## The Portland Japanese Garden: A Living Classroom

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By Lily McFeeters, U.S. Embassy intern

Imagine you're in the bustling downtown of Portland, Oregon, with the smell of coffee in the air and the sound of bikes whizzing by. Tucked away in the green hills of the city, there's a place where you can go to can escape the busy hum of everyday life, transporting you to the other side of the world: the Portland Japanese Garden.



*Strolling Pond Garden at the Portland Japanese Garden (Photo by Bruce Forster)*

We sat down with Steve Bloom, the CEO of the Portland Japanese Garden, to hear about what the garden means to him. Bloom has been to Japan a total of 73 times, including once as a Council on Foreign Relations fellow at the Tokyo University of Agriculture, where he researched how Japanese gardens form grassroots foreign relations.



*Portland Japanese Garden CEO Steve Bloom*

With eight different styles of gardens, a library, a training center, and even a café, the Portland Japanese Garden is more than simply a place of tranquility

and peace; it is a living classroom. The original designer, Professor Takuma Tono from the Tokyo University of Agriculture, intended for the garden to be a platform for teaching about various aspects of Japan. For example, Japanese artists come to the garden to exhibit their work against the backdrop of the garden and beautiful *shoji* screens instead of plain white museum walls. Artists also visit the garden for inspiration and create art in response to it.

The garden incorporates 1,000 year-old traditions with the 21<sup>st</sup> century modern aesthetic of the new Cultural Village designed by Kengo Kuma, who also designed the National Stadium for the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2020. In the Cultural Village, visitors can peruse the largest collection of publications in the world on Japanese gardens. The training center offers opportunities for guests to learn Japanese garden design, construction, and maintenance, which is a rare opportunity outside of Japan. Despite Portland's deeply rooted coffee culture, the Umami Café by Ajinomoto exclusively offers tea to encourage coffee lovers to try a taste of Japan. Customers can also experience Japanese hospitality, or *omotenashi*, in the café. In fact, all garden employees must go through *omotenashi* training so that visitors are able to experience the same quality of Japanese hospitality as they would in Japan.



*The Umami Cafe by Ajinomoto at the Portland Japanese Garden (Photo by Bruce Forster)*

The garden also emphasizes other Japanese cultural principles, such as *mitate* (to see with new eyes), *mottainai* (to not waste anything), and *ichigo ichie* (every encounter and meeting is unique). “With thousands of people experiencing the garden in their own unique way, there is a lot of *ichigo ichie* in the garden every day,” explained Bloom. People come to meditate, socialize, or even mourn the loss of a loved one. It is the seamlessly integrated culmination of a Japanese garden and the Pacific Northwest. Even

the materials used to construct the garden represent this cross-cultural bond between the U.S. and Japan, as one of the principles of Japanese garden design is to use local materials. For example, the *ishigaki* castle wall is built entirely from Baker City Blue granite found only in Oregon.



*The Castle Wall at the Portland Japanese Garden (Photo by Tyler Quinn)*

However, this relationship between Portland and Japan was not always as amicable as it is today. Portland and Sapporo became sister cities in 1959, which was less than twenty years after the end of World War II. In 1961, then Crown Prince Akihito and Princess Michiko visited Portland, creating excitement around the idea of building a Japanese garden in the U.S. However, Bloom explained to us that when the garden broke ground in 1963, the first director, Hira Kinya, felt firsthand the wounds not yet healed from the war. While he was in charge of the garden, someone spray-painted anti-Japanese obscenities on his trailer, telling him to go back to Japan. Kinya's experience was so traumatic that he vowed never to return to Portland. However, the Portland Japanese Garden invited him back for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the garden. After much persuading, Kinya agreed to return to Portland. During the week of events celebrating the anniversary, tens of thousands of people came, showing their appreciation for Kinya's efforts during the garden's beginning.

According to Bloom, Kinya is now a huge supporter of the people of Portland and the city itself. The garden played an important role in promoting understanding of Japan in the U.S. to foster closer relations between the people of Japan and the United States. "Now 70 years after the war," Bloom said, "there are no greater friends than Japan and the United States."