

The History of Portland Japanese Garden

Portland Japanese Garden was founded in 1963 and opened to the public in 1967.

Inspired in the late 1950s by a wish to grow cultural ties between Oregon and Japan, Portland Mayor Terry Schrunk and members of the Portland community conceived the idea of building a Japanese garden. These were the post-war years; the years of growing civil turmoil in America and chaos overseas. They were years when memories of World War II lay fresh and raw on both sides and tensions were still high.

The newly-formed Japanese Garden Society of Oregon had two reasons for building a Japanese garden: providing the citizens of Portland with a garden of great beauty and serenity while forging a healing connection to Japan on the heels of World War II. The Garden was imagined as blending Japanese and the Pacific Northwest landscape together as a way to experience “the other” in a way that was inspirational and rewarding.

At this time in U.S. history, Japanese gardens were similarly founded across the country as a way to build cultural understanding following the war. As nature needed no translation, an American could discover Japanese ideals and values firsthand, communicated simply through the forms and experience of a garden.

Professor Takuma Tono of Tokyo Agricultural University was retained to design the Garden. His plan included five different garden styles laid out on 5.5 acres – a significant departure from single-style gardens in Japan. The design would highlight historical developments in Japanese garden architecture and, through that, answer the Society’s educational purpose.



In 1967, the Garden formally opened to the public for the summer. That year, more than 28,000 people came before the Garden closed for the winter.



with a \$70,000 deficit.

Portland’s temperate climate and supportive, creative community helped Portland Japanese Garden become a beautiful, local landmark with 100,000 people visiting annually. At its 25th anniversary in 1988, His Excellency Nobuo Matsunaga, the ambassador of Japan to the United States visited Portland Japanese Garden and proclaimed it to be “the most beautiful and authentic Japanese garden in the world outside of Japan.” But as time went on, the organization’s operations weren’t keeping pace with its own needs. Neither were its revenues. In 2005, Steve Bloom came aboard as CEO; the organization had a \$1.7 million operating budget

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Bloom saw that there was no unified vision for the organization and set out to transform the organization into a truly cross-cultural resource. In 2007, he hired acclaimed author and scholar Diane Durston to create programming around Japanese culture, art, and education. One year later, following an international search, Bloom hired the organization's first Garden Curator, third generation Japanese Gardener Sadafumi Uchiyama to set and implement the highest standards of Japanese garden design and maintenance.

By 2010, more than 200,000 people were visiting the Garden annually. A new problem had emerged: the organization's popularity was growing beyond its capacity. To address the problem, Portland Japanese Garden retained the world-renowned architect Kengo Kuma to seek a solution.



Kuma's design principle of harmony between nature and architecture, as well as his commitment to natural materials and Japanese tradition made him the perfect architect to create a Cultural Village outside the historical gardens, evocative of the *monzenmachi* or "gate-front towns" outside of Japanese temples. This expanded footprint would help accommodate the organization's rapid visitor growth, and also create a space for visitors to encounter Japanese arts and culture.

In the spring of 2017, Portland Japanese Garden opened its new Cultural Village featuring four new structures, each LEED-certified, existing harmoniously with nature. Featuring spaces for cultural festivals, workshops, and performances as well as a Gift Shop and beautiful tea café, the Cultural Village enriches visits and prepares visitors for stepping into the sacred spaces of the Garden itself.

Today, the organization is celebrated globally as a haven of garden beauty and cross-cultural understanding. With nearly 500,000 visitors a year and an operating budget of \$11 million, Portland Japanese Garden has grown into one of the leading Japanese cultural organizations around the world. Its meticulously maintained eight gardens, and authentic Japanese programming appeals to Portland locals and international dignitaries alike.