



Portland Classical Chinese Garden The Five Elements: PLANTS

Plants in the Chinese Garden Have Many Uses

Three plants—a pine tree, a plum tree and a grove of bamboo—greet visitors in the Entry Plaza of *Lan Su Yuan*, the Portland Classical Chinese Garden. The Chinese call them ‘The Three Friends of Winter’ because they show their needles, flowers or leaves during the coldest months of winter bringing the hope that spring is not far away. From the *Knowing the Fish Pavilion* visitors can see a small grove of moso bamboo, the largest bamboo grown for timber. Bamboo reminds us of some of the many uses of plants: beauty of nature, building materials, food and—in Chinese culture—a model for virtuous (good) human behavior. During the summer months, Zither Lake becomes a water garden full of tall, graceful lotus plants. Nearby ‘sleeping lilies’ rest on the water—opening to the sun and closing at twilight. In Chinese culture, to live close to nature is a source of inspiration for the eyes, the mind, and the spirit.

Gardens Bring the Harmony of Nature into Cities

Beautiful gardens were found in the city of Suzhou in southeastern China by the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Suzhou was a large city by the end of the Ming dynasty. To bring the balance of nature into this city of more than 500,000 people (about the same size as Portland, Oregon in 2007), Chinese landscape architects created mountains, forests, rivers, and lush garden inside the walls of the residence of high-ranking government officials. The need to achieve a peaceful place filled with nature’s diversity, inside a busy city, has appeared in Chinese poetry and garden design for centuries.

My cottage is built in the midst of the human world,
Yet I hear no noise from carriage or horse.
May I ask how this can be?
If the mind is distanced, the dwelling becomes remote.
Tao Qian (365-427)

Scholars Cultivate both Plants and the Virtues of a Good Person

It is important to note that officials were assigned to their government jobs based on many difficult exams that required a deep knowledge of Chinese culture. Many years of study and practice were required to memorize all Chinese classical poetry and the philosophy of Confucius, master art and calligraphy, and act wisely and thoughtfully. The Chinese scholar often turned to many of the plants in his garden to find inspiration for his own poetry and painting. In addition, the Chinese scholar believed that plants teach important lessons for living a proper life.

According to Chinese tradition, humans and the natural world should behave in much the same ways. To become a good, honest and upright (ethical) person, one must study the character of plants and other elements. Therefore, scholars would cultivate or grow special plants in their garden that were symbols of the virtues they valued.

At *Lan Su Yuan*, visitors can observe many of these plants firsthand. Perhaps the best known among them is a trio—pine, bamboo, and plum, called the *Three Friends of Winter*. Pine trees

never lose their needles under harsh conditions and under pressure. From the pine, the scholar learns to not give up when times are tough—the virtues of endurance and strength. Plum trees sense the first signs of winter's thaw; even when other trees have only bare branches the plum tree shows its delicate flowers against the cold sky. From the plum, the scholar learns the virtue of courage. In the words of a 2-line poem (couplet) found in the Scholar's Study:

10,000 flowers dare to blossom in snow,
A single tree leads the world in greeting spring.

Hua Rende

Finally, the bamboo bends in strong winds, yet always returns to an upright position without breaking. From bamboo, the scholar learns to 'bend but not to break'. That is, he knows how to be flexible in his actions and in his thinking, without giving in to outside pressures. Being able to bend in a storm but not break is a symbol of integrity.

Plants in the Chinese Garden Tell Stories of Science, History, and Culture

During the summer months, large lotus flowers grow above the waters of Zither Lake in the center of the garden. The lotus push through the mud at the bottom of the lake and are then washed clean by the water, to show their beautiful blooms. When the petals fall away, the cone-shaped seed pods are also viewed as beautiful. In a Chinese garden it is important to show the lotus flower bud, the open flower and the seed pod together as a reminder of the cycle of life. Lotus flowers often appear in Chinese art as well as in Buddhist paintings as symbols of perfection.

Other Chinese plants also carry symbolic meanings. For instance, from the scholar's study in the Chinese Garden, a banana tree (*Musa basjoo*) can be seen through the carved pattern of the window frame. It is planted here on purpose because the banana acts as a symbol of the years of hard work it took to become a high-ranking official. History books tell of many serious Chinese students who would carefully practice their calligraphy brush strokes on banana leaves because they could not afford paper or silk (both Chinese inventions). In addition, banana leaves helped the scholar concentrate as he painted and wrote poetry. He would listen to the rain drumming on the leaves and the wind rustling the leaves and hear the peaceful sounds of nature's music.

A tree with great scientific value grows near the *Knowing the Fish Pavilion*. The ginkgo, one of the oldest plant species on earth, has a history dating back some 200 million years. It is considered a 'living fossil' because ginkgos grew when dinosaurs roamed the earth. Ginkgos growing in valleys in China survived the planet's last ice age about 12,000 years ago.

“China is the Mother of All Gardens” [quote by Ernest Henry Wilson, British Botanist (1876-1930)]

China is known for the huge number of different plant species. The country is the native home of more than 30,000 plant species—nearly one-eighth of the world's total. Through the efforts of brave plant collectors, many have been transplanted across the globe. Many common garden plants believed to be “All-American” actually have their origins in China. For instance, the ancestors of modern roses, rhododendrons, camellias, and magnolias were first brought from China to Western Europe. The leaves of a Chinese evergreen shrub—the *Camellia sinensis*—enjoys wide popularity as a beverage as the leaves are found brewing in teapots across the world. It was on tea clipper trading ships beginning in the late 15th century, that most of the popular Chinese garden plants were brought to Europe, and then to gardens here in the United States.