

Feature

Advertising

The Garden of Quiet Listening

By Amy Acheson

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A young woman hikes down a worn path. Her pace slows as she maneuvers across a few stepping stones. Reaching her destination, a simple shelter enveloped within a canopy of trees, she sets down her backpack to rest a bit. As she gazes upon the landscape in front of her, the fresh breeze awakens her senses and the trickle of water from a stream nearby welcomes her back to this peaceful place that she has grown to know so well.



Photo by John Noltner

Stepping stones guide visitors through the Japanese garden.

She meanders out into the sunshine and steps upon a large rock by the lakeshore to peer upon the glistening water. Her eyes travel along the undulating shoreline, pausing momentarily to spot rugged rocks among the green vegetation. She turns her focus to a magnificent, timeless tree. Its well-defined branches reach out, reflecting onto the water below. It speaks of gentle wisdom and antiquity. Far off in the distance, a mountain stream weaves gracefully through the rising bluffs and tree-covered hills.

This vast and expansive view brings a quietness to her heart. She ponders about where she might travel someday, her life's ambitions, goals, studies Then glancing at her watch, she hurriedly picks up her backpack and rushes off to her next class.

This college student is experiencing nature as art in a Japanese-style garden called Jo Ryo En, The Garden of Quiet Listening at Carleton College in Northfield. The Garden of Quiet Listening, rated as one of the top 10 in the United States by the Journal of Japanese Gardening, is praised for its "grace, human scale, and contemplative atmosphere."

The garden's designer, David Slawson explains it best, "Japanese landscape garden design is like painting landscape in three dimensions. As a garden artist trained in Japan under master, Kinsaku Nakane, I know how to heighten the experience by simplifying it to the essentials. The garden inspires viewers to see the natural world in a new and deeper way."

Slawson finds his inspiration in the regional landscape, the nature of the site and the client's taste. For Carleton's garden design Slawson was inspired by the scenery of the Minnesota River's undulating shore and open plains rising to bluffs.

Slawson composed area rocks and locally grown plants to evoke the desired scenic elements. He chose low, spreading junipers, sedum and other fine-textured ground covers to suggest open meadows, and mugho pines, dwarf spruce and yews randomly placed to suggest trees interspersed within meadows and rolling hills. Shades of green serve as the primary plant color. Flowering plants are used sparingly, as accents or "grace notes."

The placement of trees and shrubs at varying heights and spacing accentuates the sense of depth. Odd numbered groupings create a sense of incompleteness that draws your eye to the next area. This zigzagging movement, an aspect of asymmetric design, enhances the sense of scale and leaves observers with the impression they are viewing something much larger than actual dimensions would suggest.

The Garden of Quiet Listening came to fruition largely through the efforts of Bardwell Smith, professor emeritus of Asian studies at Carleton. After visiting Kyoto, Japan, in 1965, Smith marveled at the beauty of the gardens and thought one day Carleton should have one too. "Carleton College is a liberal arts college that strives to have a cosmopolitan point of view receptive to diversity," Smith said. "Carleton's culture and society led to this kind of jewel — that is, a well-planned, built and maintained garden."

Mary Bigelow, professional gardener from the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, has tended Carleton's Japanese garden for the past 16 years, with the help of student workers and volunteers. Slawson, the garden's designer, comes for an annual visit in May to guide improvements and maintenance.

A key garden focal point is the triple-trunked Scotch pine that has grown in character but has stayed the same 12-foot height since it was planted in 1976, thanks to careful pruning.

"The object behind pruning," Bigelow said, "is not to force a plant into something it's not, but to work with its natural shape. Pruning is used to enhance its look as with an old, wind-blown tree. You want to give it a sense of movement and personality. If a tree has three straight sprouts going up and a fourth is straying off to the side — I'll go with that one. So when I prune a tree, I'm not trying to make it do something it's incapable of. It already has the branch there. I'm just trying to encourage it to take the scenic route."

"In Japanese culture, things that are aged and have survived in difficult times are respected," said Bigelow.

She draws a parallel to Minnesota's north shore. "You see that one tree growing on the side of a cliff and you have no idea how it has managed. It's stretching out, curling ... and is sort of contorted looking. The fact that it is there alone is a miracle. You know it didn't just happen yesterday. This tree has some stories to tell. It has survived how many winters and wind storms. It's the same with Japanese gardens. They tell a story of nature."

The Garden of Quiet Listening reminds one to seek out those places that resonate within you and speak to you personally — intimate, comfortable settings where you can truly experience nature. It might even be in your own backyard. Carleton College is home to not only the Japanese garden but also several hundred acres of native prairie and woodland, two lakes, and beautiful arched wooden bridges for strolling to the islands. If you're stopping by the college, be sure to visit them all.

Garden's Location: ***Carleton College, behind Watson Hall at the corner of First Avenue and Maple Street.***

Designer David Slawson's website address: www.slawsoncreations.com

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