

Hidden Gem Lies in the Middle of City's Convention District

Salt Lake City, UT – Amid the concrete, bricks, asphalt and hard, angular edges of the west side of the Convention District, there lies an urban oasis that is totally unexpected. A small garden that uses light, space, wind, water, and even part of the adjoining building to create a haven in the middle of hectic. The Japanese Community Garden is tucked away between the Salt Palace Convention Center and the Japanese Church of Christ, offering visitors a compact view into the tradition, symbolism and art of the Japanese garden.

This Japanese garden is designed using the “shakkei” method, meaning “borrowed landscape.” It draws the large, outer landscape – tall trees further down the street, for example – into the composition of the small garden. What it lacks in size it makes up for in content; a rich layering of textures, colors and shapes.

Start at ground level to see the carpet of periwinkle, flagstone, rocks and water. Small shrubs are pruned to give a windswept appearance. Look for rocks suspended from branches on lengths of rope as the branches are being trained to bow. Notice the placement and pruning of wisteria, Chinese yellow bamboo, traditional Japanese cherry trees, pine and Japanese iris. Linden trees and Boston ivy create a backdrop to the garden, obscuring the bricks of the building. Look beyond the garden from various views to understand “shakkei.”

The centerpiece of the garden is a carefully-sculpted Japanese red maple. All of the shrubs are pruned in the bonsai style. Adjacent to the garden, at the entrance to the Japanese church, stands a cypress tree that is perhaps the area’s best example of bonsai. Although it is 24-years old, it stands under four feet tall.

Rocks are another important aesthetic and symbolic part of the Japanese garden. The large rocks were selected from Northern Utah for their unusual shapes and colors. They symbolize mountains and landforms, and characterize human elements, such as the “guest,” the “neighbor,” the “family member.”

Humans are not the only ones who appreciate this urban refuge. Around 4:00 every day, the birds flock to the garden for a bath in the small retention pond or to feed on the insects. Red finches, blackbirds and robins join the nesting doves and sparrows. A dragonfly was spotted clinging to a vine.

Visitors are asked to view the garden from the sidewalk and driveway, so as not to damage the delicate plantings. At some point, the garden may be accessible so visitors can sit, meditate and enjoy the sights, sounds and fragrances.

The garden plot was created when the Salt Palace Convention Center expanded in 2006. The Salt Lake County-owned facility encroached on the Japanese neighborhood, so this space was created as a living homage to the Issei and the Nisei, Japanese people who were first to immigrate and their U.S.-born children, respectively. Today, the garden is maintained by SMG, the company that manages the Salt Palace. Gordon Hashimoto is the Japanese garden maintenance consultant.

Hashimoto comes from a long and distinguished line of men who had special appreciation for nature. His great-great-great grandfather Hashimoto Gahō was the co-founder of the Japan Fine Arts Academy in Tokyo, specializing in classical Japanese landscape paintings. Gordon Hashimoto’s father was a Japanese gardener practitioner in Portland, OR, and taught young

Gordon many of the techniques he employs today. He laughs when he describes the 50-year gap between his father's lessons and application.

The "gap" to which Hashimoto refers was his journey from Portland to Eugene to obtain his undergraduate degree; his time in Boston at Harvard's Graduate School of Design; his life in Salt Lake City as an architect, urban designer and professor at the University of Utah. Now retired from academia, he works under contract for the Salt Palace Convention Center, pouring his vast knowledge of the art of Japanese gardening techniques and his background in design into this showplace.

After the garden was installed in 2007, he volunteered his time to maintain it. Approached in 2010 by the manager of the Salt Palace grounds crew, Hashimoto was offered a part-time job. He is at the garden nearly every day, pruning, shaping, weeding and thinking about adding new elements, such as enhanced lighting, a traditional-style footbridge, jasmine.

One of the most recent additions is a Japanese lace leaf maple that sits in the southeast corner of the garden. It was a "leftover" from an Outdoor Retailer show at the Salt Palace. Used as decoration for the show, it was on death's door when it was given to Hashimoto. It took over 18-months to nurse it back to health, but now it thrives under his care, as does the rest of this garden that keeps the memory of the once-thriving Japanese community alive.

The Japanese Community Garden is always open for viewing. It is located on the west side of the Salt Palace Convention Center, on 100 South off of 300 West.

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