

Iconic Gardens of Portland, Oregon: The Rose Garden, Japanese Garden & Chinese Garden



Portland, Oregon is often called “The City of Roses”, and with a mild climate (Zone 9) with little humidity in the summer it’s namesake plant does exceptionally well. There are more than 200 parks within the city limits and a walk through almost any neighborhood reveals many residents’ fascination with gardening. The city has a wealth of public gardens open to the public, including three iconic gardens – each with its own style and purpose – that are a must on any visit to Portland: the Rose Garden, Japanese Garden and Chinese Garden.

Portland is the “City of Roses”.

Two of these gardens are located in Washington Park, one of the oldest and most well-used parks in Portland on the hills west of downtown, with numerous attractions including the International Rose Test Garden and the Portland Japanese Garden, as well as Hoyt Arboretum which showcases 2,068 species of trees and shrubs on 185 hilly acres with 12 miles of trails. The third garden covered in this article, the Lan Su Chinese Garden, fills a city block on the north end of downtown.

International Rose Test Garden



Mike Maddox in the Portland Rose Garden.

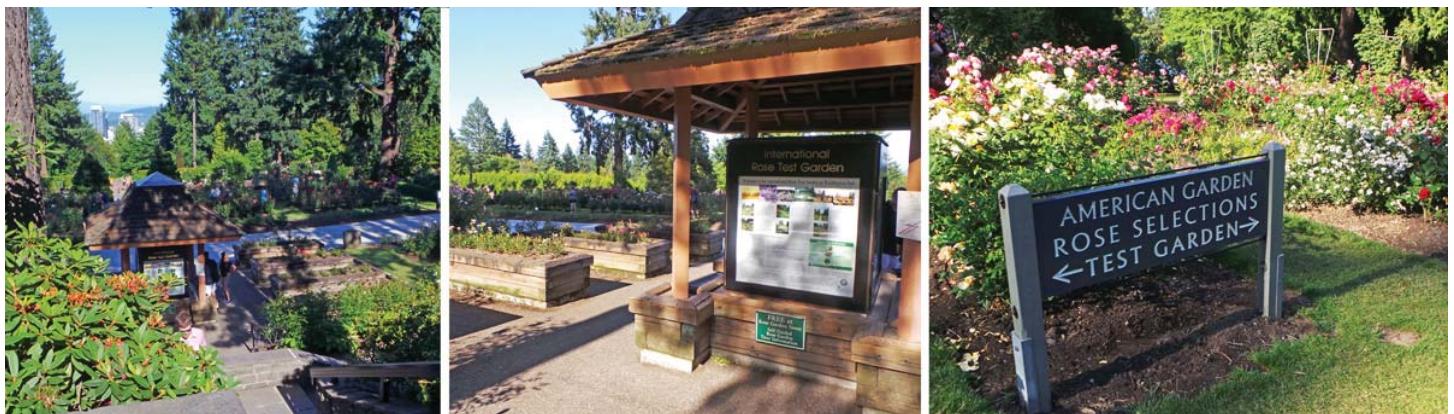
With over 10,000 rose plants on four acres in several tiers, this famous garden overlooking the city – and dramatic views of Mt. Hood in the distance on clear days – is not only a collection of numerous types and cultivars of roses, but also an important rose testing site. The garden evaluates plants as part of the nationwide American Garden Rose Selections (AGRS) which replaced All American Rose Selections (AARS) in 2013. Unofficially known as the Portland Rose Garden, this is the oldest official continuously operated public test gardens in the US and just one of 11 AGRS test sites (others closer to Wisconsin include Glencoe, IL and Ames, IA). Judges evaluate the roses throughout the season for disease resistance, vigor, flower quality and quantity, and more. Other ongoing independent rose testing is done in grower trials, David Austin Roses and miniature roses. Roses are in bloom from April through October, typically peaking in June.

The idea for a rose test garden was proposed in 1915 to preserve hybrid roses grown in Europe that rose lovers feared would be destroyed in the bombings of World War I. Approved by the Park Bureau in



The International Rose Test Gardens in Portland, Oregon offer fabulous flowers throughout the summer.

1917 the garden and a natural amphitheater (which hosts plays and classical music concerts in warmer months), designed in 1921 by Florence Holmes Gerke, the landscape architect for the city of Portland, was dedicated in June 1924. Since then additions have included the enclosed Shakespeare Garden honoring the Bard with roses named after characters in his plays (which was moved from its original location at Crystal Springs Lake in 1945), the formal Gold Medal Garden added in 1970 to highlight Portland's award winners (Portland is the only North American city to issue such awards, with the first "Gold Medal" rose award given in 1919), and the Miniature Rose Garden, established in 1975, which is one of only six testing grounds for the American Rose Society (ARS) miniature rose test program. In 1991, the Portland Rose Society, started in 1889 and now a nonprofit organization offering educational programs on rose culture and encouraging the use of roses in the landscape, donated the pavilion overlooking the Gold Medal Garden.



Looking down at the Portland Rose Garden (L) and the Information kiosk (C) and one of the test gardens (R).



Some of the 10,000 rose bushes in the International Rose Test Garden.

Portland Japanese Garden

This truly authentic Japanese Garden is set on 12.5 acres on the slopes above the Rose Garden. Designed by Professor Takuma Tono beginning in 1963 (five years after Portland became a sister city with Sapporo, Japan), the garden opened to the public in 1967 on 5 acres where the old Portland Zoo once stood. At that time it was viewed as a symbol of healing between the United States and Japan, less than two decades after the two countries were adversaries in World War II, and has evolved into a sanctuary of idealized beauty and a refuge from urban life. Consisting of five main gardens representing historical developments and concepts in Japanese garden design influenced by Shinto, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophies – the Tea Garden, the Strolling Pond Garden, the Natural Garden, the Sand and Stone Garden, and the Flat Garden – it offers traditional design and beautiful meticulously maintained plantings intended to connect the visitor to nature with meandering streams, intimate walkways, and tranquil spaces. This is one of the highest ranked public Japanese Gardens in North America (consistently #1 or #2, always competing with Anderson Japanese Gardens in Rockford, Illinois for top honors). The Japanese Garden Society, a private, nonprofit foundation runs the garden which is open year round.



A pathway in the Portland Japanese Garden leads past the stone Koto-ji lantern brought from Kenrokuen Garden in Kanazawa, Japan.

A water garden of cascading pools welcomes visitors to the Welcome Center at the bottom of the hill. The new **Entry Garden**, completed in April 2017 as part of a \$33.5 million, 20-month-long expansion



The new Welcome Center (L), entrance (C), and Entry Garden (R), opened in April 2017.



The authentic Antique Gate (L), an azalea in flower (LC), looking up the hillside (RC, photo by Ann Wied), and approaching the Cultural Crossings Village (R).

project, includes a landscaped walk zigzagging up a terraced stone path. Go under the 100-year-old authentic temple Antique Gate, a 1976 gift of the Japanese Ancestral Society of Oregon, to hike up through native forest of towering firs and cedars and understory plants including ferns, huckleberry, trillium, and wood strawberry.

Visitors arrive at the new **Cultural Crossing Village**, three steel-and-glass pavilions designed by world-renowned architect Kengo Kuma, including the Japanese Arts Learning Center, the Garden House, and the Umami Café linked by Tateuchi Courtyard. The upper roof of several of these buildings are a green roof, planted with sedums and other low-growing plants. Here there is the tiny, easily overlooked **Tsubo-Niwa** (courtyard garden) – a modern urban garden occupying very little actual space but still incorporating the essential elements of a Japanese garden: stone, water, and plants – near the gift



The Garden House across Tateuchi Courtyard, with the golden-leaved tree in the Tsubo-Niwa at right (L); the green roof (LC); blooming sedums on the roof (RC); tall trees tower over the Zagunis Castle Wall (R, photo by Ann Wied).

shop in the Learning Center, and the **Ellie M. Hill Bonsai Terrace** on the opposite side of the courtyard. Partnering with local bonsai practitioners, the seasonally rotating displays feature specimens of this ancient art that creates miniaturized but realistic representations of nature in the carefully shaped trees in containers. The west side of the Cultural Crossing Village is defined by a 185-foot-long castle wall constructed of 1,000 tons of Baker City blue granite angled into the ground using Shogun-period techniques rarely seen outside of Japan.



The Ellie M. Hill Bonsai Terrace (L); plants on display (LC) including a Rocky Mountain juniper, *Juniperus scopulorum* (RC); a horticulturist pruning a bonsai specimen (R).

Walk past the carved stone Imperial Guardian lions and through the wooden gate along gravel paths toward the **Pavillion Gallery**. Built in 1980 by local builders in Japanese style, it is only used for exhibitions and special events. The eastern side of the Gallery offers a spectacular view of downtown Portland and Mount Hood (which resembles Japan's Mount Fuji) to the east. On the other side, the typical urban raked **Flat Garden** is surrounded by lawn, moss, evergreens, and azaleas and specific plants designed to showcase the distinctive beauty of different seasons: spring is signified by the 85 year old weeping cherry, the raked white sand representing cool water



The Flat Garden.

of summer, autumn is represented by the century old laceleaf Japanese maple, and the black pines represent winter. The two islands in the sea of raked sand depict a sake cup and gourd-shaped bottle, symbols of pleasure and happiness.



One of the stone Imperial Guardian lions on the path to the entry gate (L), the end of the Pavilion Gallery (LC), view of Portland and Mt. Hood from the Pavilion (C and RC), and the back side of the Flat Garden (R).

Head along leafy paths for the largest garden, the **Strolling Pond Garden**, consisting of the Upper Pond and Lower Pond connected by a flowing stream. Historically, strolling pond gardens were at their height during the Edo period (1603–1867), the large scale and grand style announcing the wealth of aristocrats and feudal lords on whose estates these were built. The paths feature a Buddha statue and stone lanterns and the iconic elegant, handcrafted Moon Bridge that was a gift of the city of Hiroshima takes visitors across the Upper Pond.



The Moon Bridge (L, photo by Ann Wied) over the Upper Pond (LC, C and RC) in the Strolling Pond Garden, and looking back up at the Moon Bridge from path below (R).

The Lower Pond has a Zig-Zag bridge weaving through beds of Japanese iris, offering access to view the colorful koi filling the water, with Heavenly Falls tumbling down the nearby hillside.



Along the path from the Upper Pond to the Lower Pond (L, photo by Ann Wied), the Zig-Zag bridge (LC), people on the bridge (RC) admiring the colorful koi in the Pond (R).

Nearby, the **Tea Garden** provides a peaceful, natural space for quiet reflection on the beauty of nature and the art of living in harmony. A pathway of carefully placed, naturally shaped stepping stones, lined by lanterns, winds through the rustic garden to the Kashintei Tea House. The authentic tea house was constructed in Japan and assembled on site in 1968.



Japanese iris, *Iris ensata* 'Blue Spritz' (L), the Lower Pond (C) and stone lantern along the shore (R).



Visitors viewing the Lower Pond (L) and Heavenly Falls (LC); a 100-year-old granite five-tiered pagoda lantern, a gift from Portland's sister city of Sapporo in 1964 on the slope above the Lower Pond (RC) and mossy slopes (R).

From the Strolling Pond, hike up the hill and over to the **Natural Garden**. The most contemporary of the original five gardens, this garden uses primarily deciduous plants, including shrubs and ferns native to the Pacific Northwest, not just traditional Japanese plants. Originally called the Hillside Garden and planned as a moss garden, it was redesigned the early 1970s and then again in 1990 to encourage rest and reflection amid the dense trees and shrubs intended to evoke a wildness not seen elsewhere in the Garden. Stone steps wind down past shallow, meandering waterscapes covering the southern hillside.



Walking into the Natural Garden (L) with interesting stone steps (LC and RC, photo by Ann Wied) and ponds (R).

At the end of the trail through the Natural Garden you arrive at the **Sand and Stone Garden**. This raked garden is a karesansui (literally translating to "dry landscape"), a style developed in Japan in the late Kamakura period (1185–1333) which incorporates the important Japanese aesthetic principle of yohaku-no-bi, meaning "the beauty of blank space." This style is often referred to as a Zen Garden because this type of garden meant for contemplation was often part of a Zen monastery, but it is not exclusive to monasteries. The weathered stones rising from rippled sand are intended to suggest the ocean and serve as focal points for quiet contemplation.



The Sand and Stone Garden from above (L) and at the entrance below (LC) and rocks in the raked gravel (RC and R).

Lan Su Chinese Garden

One the most authentic Chinese gardens outside of China, this Ming Dynasty style garden is a surprise within a single city block on the north end of Downtown in the Old Town Chinatown neighborhood. This tranquil urban oasis poetically interpreted as “The Garden of Awakening Orchids” was built starting in 1999 in collaboration with 65 artisans from Portland’s sister city, Suzhou, China (the name also combines Lan representing Portland and Su representing Suzhou) and opened in fall 2000. Designer Kuang Zhen used traditional methods and materials (including 500 tons of rock from Lake Tai in China) to meld art, architecture, design and nature, recreating a garden from another era – the home and garden of a 16th century scholar – in a modern setting on roughly 40,000 square feet. Covered walkways, bridges, artfully placed plants and historic artifacts in the buildings, such as elaborately carved screens, furniture and tools offer a glimpse into Chinese culture, history and thought.



The Lan Su Chinese Garden is surrounded by the tall buildings of Downtown Portland, reflected in Lake Zither.

The classical Chinese garden contains four essential elements of water, rocks, architecture and plants surrounded by a wall, usually painted white, to serve as a clean backdrop for the trees and flowers. The central pond of water is surrounded by many structures, large and small, to help divide the garden into individual scenes or landscapes. A variety of plants, all with symbolic meanings, bring the wildness of nature, intended to contrast with the straight lines of the buildings, pavilions, bridges and towers and the immobility of the rocks. Doors and windows frame views to create the illusion of infinite space;



Classical elements include large rocks imported from China (LC) and a white wall enclosing the garden (RC). Doors and windows are intended to frame views, such as from the Courtyard of Tranquility (L) or the Flowers Bathing in Spring Rain pavilion from a panel at Painted Boat in Misty Rain (R).

textures and views are carefully arranged to reflect the delicate harmony between yin and yang; the design of the garden promotes proper flow of qi through the space; each courtyard has pavement with a different pattern; poetry is inscribed on rocks, doorways, buildings, and pavilions to create a conversation across time and place.

China is home to more than 30,000 plant species (about 1/8 of the world's total) and this garden offers a microcosmic view of the wealth of China's native flora with more than 300 species and cultivars native to China, including more than 50 specimen trees, many rare and unusual shrubs and perennials, orchids, water plants, and collections of magnolia, peony, camellia, rhododendron, and bamboo (unfortunately most of the plants are not labeled, and although they do provide laminated ID sheets to the more common things, none of the plants we wanted to know about were on those). And even though most of the plants in the garden are native to China, none were actually imported from that country, but were found in gardens and nurseries in the Pacific Northwest, brought in before importation was banned.



'Moonlight' hydrangea vine (*Schizophragma hydrangeoides*) vine (L) and foliage and flowers (LC); Chinese mayapple (*Podophyllum pleianthum*) (RC) and terrestrial orchid *Bletilla striata* (R).



Velvet-leaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea aspera 'Macrophylla'*) (L), and unidentified plants in the garden (LC-R).

Enter through the **Courtyard of Tranquility**, typical of a courtyard of a private home and garden of a wealthy family, to enter another time in a faraway place.



The entrance to the Lan Su Chinese Garden (L), entry gate (C) and inside the Courtyard of Tranquility (R).

On one side is the **Hall of Brocade Clouds** where lattice doors and windows ensure that everyone can see the family's wealth and status. On the opposite side of that building is the Terrace overlooking koi- and water lily-filled Lake Zither.



The Hall of Brocade Clouds from the Courtyard of Tranquility (L) and from across Lake Zither (LC), details of the roof with a *chiwen* (dragonfish) to swallow all evil influences and protect the building from fire and bat-shaped drip tiles along the roofline (RC), and the view from the Terrace across Lake Zither to the Moon Locking Pavilion (R).

Pass through the Moon Gate from the Courtyard and continue along the covered walkway, feeling the rock mosaic underfoot, to the **Knowing the Fish Pavilion**. The name refers to a conversation between two philosophers. Walking along a stream, one tells the other how happy he finds the fish to be. The other replies, "You are not a fish. How can you know that the fish are happy?" The first responds "You are not me. How do you know I don't know the fish are happy?"



Looking back at the door from the Courtyard of Tranquility under a covered walkway (L) with stone mosaic paths (RC) to the Knowing the Fish Pavilion (RC) and the view of another walkway from that Pavilion (R).

The **Reflections in Clear Ripples** building, which would have served as a gathering place for music, painting or games, houses temporary art displays, from historical to contemporary. Pass by the small



Inside the Reflections in Clear Ripples building (L), looking out at the Knowing the Fish Pavilion (C) and the Flowers Bathing in Spring Rain pavilion and its carved ginkgo wood panels (R).

Flowers Bathing in Spring Rain, a small pavilion where six panels carved from ginkgo wood illustrate actual ancient gardens in Suzhou.

Go through the Moon Gate into the **Scholar's Courtyard**, an extension of the Scholar's Study, with its symbolic plum trees and stone mosaic "plum blossoms on cracked ice" signaling the coming of spring and symbolizing endurance and hope.



Heading toward the Moon Gate into the Scholar's Courtyard (L), unidentified blooming mimosa tree (C) and shady spot inside the Courtyard (R).



Inside the Scholar's Study (L), hallway along the Study (C) and pavilion on end overlooking Lake Zither (R).

towering over the north side of the Garden. On clear nights the reflection of the moon is locked in as a shimmering spotlight in the center of the lake by the pavilion's shadow. The two-story **Tower of Cosmic**

Scholar's Study (the Celestial Hall of Permeating Fragrance) was where men wrote poetry, practiced calligraphy, and admired art, as well as studied for civil service exams that would ensure the family's prosperity.

Wander the zig-zag bridge out to the **Moon Locking** pavilion in the middle of the lake, with the tall Tower of Cosmic Reflections



The Moon Locking Pavilion (L), the zigzag walkway over the water from the Pavilion (LC), view of the Hall of Brocade Clouds from the Moon Locking Pavilion (RC) and pink waterlily (R).

Reflections building was where the women would have spent most of their time, managing finances and other affairs of the family, while observing the garden and city beyond. It serves as a 50-seat teahouse where visitors can enjoy tea and snacks from The Tao of Tea.



The Tower of Cosmic Reflections and Lake Zither (L), rooflines of the Tower (C) and Rock Mountain (R).

Walk past the **Rock Mountain and Waterfall** where the rocks are designed to appear as rugged mountains in the distance, complete with cascading streams. The inscription in red characters on the stones translates to “ten thousand ravines engulfed in deep clouds”.

Finally there is the **Painted Boat in Misty Rain**, a boat-shaped pavilion representing “the boat of friendship that departed from Suzhou and made its way across the ocean to Portland. From inside, you’re meant to feel as if you’re anchored on shore and being rocked by gentle waves.”

– Susan Mahr and Mike Maddox, University of Wisconsin – Madison

Additional Information:

- International Rose Test Garden - Washington Park – on the City of Portland website at <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/parks/finder/index.cfm?action=viewpark&propertyid=1113>
- International Rose Test Garden – Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/International-Rose-Test-Garden/135283626505245>
- Portland Japanese Garden – official website at <https://japanesegarden.org/>
- Lan Su Chinese Garden – official website at <http://www.lansugarden.org/>