

RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

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San Francisco Japanese Tea Garden

by Mary Yee

NESTLED IN Golden Gate Park, the San Francisco Japanese Tea Garden is a little world unto its own, although it's hardly a secret. One of the country's oldest public Japanese gardens, it's been around for over 125 years and is a popular destination for locals and tourists. Stone lanterns, pagodas, cherry trees, bonsai and much more are packed into about 5 acres of undulating terrain. A waterfall tumbles down a rocky hillside to a large pond filled with colorful koi. In the dry garden, or *karasansui*, raked gravel serves as a metaphor for water.

Madison Sink, communications associate for the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, which oversees the garden, explains a proper Japanese "tea garden is a small, intimate space attached to a tea house where tea ceremonies are hosted." She says, "Our garden is a stroll garden designed for walking through that often includes hills and ponds. We were named in the late 1800s, when 'Japanese Tea Garden' was a ubiquitous term used for all Japanese-style gardens."

FROM FAIR ATTRACTION TO GARDEN

The garden originated as an exhibit built by George Turner Marsh to represent a Japanese village in the California Midwinter International Exposition of 1894. Businessman and gardener Makoto Hagiwara, a Japanese immigrant, was hired to care for the garden after the exposition ended. He ended up living on the property as a concessionaire and enlarging the garden from its original acre to its current size.

Hagiwara died in 1925, but members of his family continued to live on and care for the property as a popular attraction until World War II, when they, like many Japanese-Americans, were forced to move to an internment camp. Some of the trees in the garden were sold and



Above: This collection of dwarf shrubs on a hillside adjacent to the Temple Gate once belonged to the Hagiwara family. **Left:** The highly-arched drum bridge is a visitor favorite.

replanted in a private garden, where they were thus safeguarded until they were returned to the Japanese Tea Garden in the mid-1960s. These trees that once belonged to the Hagiwara family, says Sink, are planted on the hillside with the large waterfall and are a direct link to the garden's previous history.

According to head gardener Steven Pitsenbarger, the collection includes Hinoki cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*), Japanese black pine (*Pinus thunbergii*), and blue Atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca'). "My favorite tree on the hillside is the California native Monterey pine (*Pinus radiata*) that hangs over the waterfall," says Pitsenbarger. Other Monterey pines exist in the garden, each in contorted shapes due to over 100 years of meticulous pruning.

The current garden bears little resemblance to the original, but the intent is still to showcase principles of traditional Japanese culture and landscaping.

SEASONAL DELIGHTS

The garden is open year round, but spring is the most popular time to visit, when the cherry trees burst into pink and white

Additional Information

San Francisco Japanese Tea Garden

75 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive
Golden Gate Park
San Francisco, CA 94118
www.sfjapaneseteagarden.org
(415) 661-1316

- Daily, 9 a.m.–4:30 p.m. Check website for most current information.
- Admission: Free from 9 a.m.–10 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Adults: (March–Sept.): \$12; (Oct.–Feb.): \$11. San Francisco residents: \$7. Check website for complete list of fees.
- RAP benefits: Free admission.

bloom. “Most of our cherries are Yoshinos (*Prunus xyedoensis*), which bloom in late March to early April, but we also have some Kwanzan cherries (*Prunus* ‘Kanzan’) with double flowers that bloom later in April to May,” says Pitsenbarger. Azaleas also put on a vibrant spring show.

In autumn, a variety of maples and ginkgos (*Ginkgo biloba*) take their turn providing spectacular color. Of note, two young ginkgos—descendants of trees that survived the bombing of Hiroshima—were planted in the garden in 2019.

Throughout the year, visitors can stroll the garden’s winding paths to enjoy the soothing green of cedars, pines, bamboo, ferns, and moss.

OTHER POINTS OF INTEREST

One of the best places to take in the scenery is in the small tea house and eatery looking over the secondary pond where visitors can purchase and enjoy a snack of udon noodles, miso soup, green tea, or other typical Japanese fare.

The garden features four large traditional gates, starting with the imposing one at the main entrance. Another, the Temple Gate, is located not far from a five-tiered red pagoda. The pagoda had been part of an indoor 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition exhibit, where it was used to display Japanese food products.

A relic from the 1894 expo is the arched drum bridge. Built of wood, this steep, 10-foot-tall structure is a magnet for visitors who carefully climb its rungs to get to the top for an elevated view of the garden.

HOW THE RECIPROCAL ADMISSIONS PROGRAM (RAP) WORKS

This American Horticultural Society program is designed to encourage people to visit gardens, arboreta, and conservatories while traveling. As a current member, you receive free admission and/or other special discounts at more than 330 sites throughout North America! Here’s how to make the most of this member benefit:

- View the current list of participating locations and the RAP benefits they offer at www.ahsgardening.org/rapgardens.
- Contact the garden to confirm the RAP benefits it offers. (Some sites may choose to enforce a 90-mile exclusion policy; if your zip code falls within that distance from the location, you would not receive the offered RAP benefits there.) Admission to special events may also be excluded.
- Present your current membership card at the admissions counter or gift shop to receive the RAP benefit(s) offered by that garden. Each card will only admit the individual(s) listed on the card. In the case of a family, couple, or household membership card that does not list individual names, the garden must extend the benefit(s) to at least two members; it is at the garden’s discretion to extend benefits to more than two individuals. Some gardens may require a photo ID.



Framed by cherry trees and azaleas in spring bloom, the tea house looks out on a small pond.

Of the many lanterns scattered throughout the garden, the most significant is the 9,000-pound bronze Lantern of Peace. A gift from the children of Japan, it was dedicated in January 1953 with the help of the Japanese Consul General.

Near the gift shop is a large bronze statue of Buddha that was cast in Japan in 1790. It was presented to the garden after World War II by a San Francisco art dealer.

OPEN FOR VISITATION

The San Francisco Japanese Tea Garden has

been undergoing some needed renovations since early 2020, but during the ongoing pandemic, it has been open to the public, with visitors encouraged to purchase tickets in advance. Events have been postponed, however. Madison Sink says the garden fills a need more than ever: “Japanese gardens are spaces that allow people to connect with nature, leave the world outside the garden, and exist in the moment.”

Mary Yee is managing editor and art director of The American Gardener.