

Portland Classical Chinese Garden

History

The Portland Classical Chinese Garden is the result of a continuing collaboration between the cities of Portland and Suzhou. Suzhou is Portland's sister city in China's Jiangsu province. The dream of building a Suzhou-style garden in Portland was a primary reason for the formation of the sister city relationship.

Suzhou is located approximately 60 miles west of Shanghai on the eastern coast of China. Founded in 514 BC, it is one of China's oldest cities. It has a mild climate, similar to Portland's. By 1,000 AD, it had become a thriving city with an economy based on rice production and trade. Many scholars who held official positions in government lived there. Several homes of these scholar-officials featured beautiful gardens. The gardens were meant to be a miniaturization of nature, a living form of Chinese landscape painting. They were places for meditation, reflection, horticulture, painting, poetry, and conversation with friends and family. *Lan Su Yuan* is designed mostly in the style of Ming dynasty gardens (1368-1644 AD). It is a unique garden, designed specifically for its location in Portland by Suzhou designers, who used traditional garden design principles, practices, and materials to ensure its authenticity.

Groundbreaking was in July 1999, and the Garden opened on September 14th, 2000. Over 60 Suzhou artisans and craftsmen lived in Portland while constructing the walls, buildings, pavilions and walkways using materials and tools they brought from China. The materials included roof and floor tiles, all the hand carved woodwork, the latticed windows, and over 500 tons of Taihu Rocks and granite. The different colored pebbles used in the mosaic courtyards and pathways are also from China.

A classical Chinese garden generally consists of five elements: plants, stone, water, architecture, and poetry. The Garden's plant collection is extraordinary. Over 90% of the plants in the Garden are indigenous to China; however, they were found in the United States, and acquired from many sources, including nurseries, private collections and gardens—thanks largely to generous donations.

Entry Plaza

On the east side of the courtyard is a doorway that is the entrance to the Garden. What is striking about the entrance is its modesty, as one is entering into a reclusive private garden like those built for China's scholar officials in Suzhou during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Over the entrance are the three Chinese characters that are read right to left: "Lan Su Yuan". This is the name of the Garden and can be interpreted two ways. "Lan" sounds like the "lan" in Portland, and "Su" sounds like the "Su" in Suzhou, so the Garden is known as the "Portland-Suzhou Garden." Appropriate to a scholar's garden, the characters were carefully chosen for a dual meaning. "Lan" is the word for "Orchid", "Su" is the word for

“Arise” or “Awaken”, and “Yuan” is the word for “Garden”—note the wall as part of the character. Thus the poetic name for the garden is *The Garden of the Awakening Orchids*.

In this plaza stands a beautiful rock from Lake Tai, an important lake to the west of Suzhou. Eroded rocks from Lake Tai have long been prized in Suzhou gardens. The Chinese term for landscape is “Shan Shui” or “Mountain and Water.” As a scholar’s garden historically creates a retreat into Nature, especially within an urban setting, mountains and water must be included. Traveling up the Taihu rocks with your eyes, the more you will see, and be able to imagine yourself adventuring up a mountain to its peak.

Surrounding the rock are three special plantings—pine, flowering plum, and bamboo. Together they are known as the *Three Friends of Winter* and are commonly featured together in Chinese art. During the harshest times of the year, the plants display needle, flower, or leaf, thereby demonstrating the scholarly virtues of strength, courage, flexibility, and overall integrity.

Courtyard of Tranquility

In the *Courtyard of Tranquility* is found the *Hall of Brocade Clouds*. This courtyard is where guests would traditionally enter the Garden. The hall would be used for family ceremonies and as a formal greeting space for important guests. On the roof, you can see two large dragon fish. They were used to protect the building from fire, since they represent the god of the sea, who could bring rain.

Knowing the Fish Pavilion

Passing through the flower-shaped gate with the overhead inscription “Enter the Wonderland,” you reach *Knowing the Fish Pavilion*, a place for meditation and philosophical discussions. The Taoist belief holds that we are all part of nature and, therefore, have an innate connection with all of nature’s wonders.

Scholar gardens like *Lan Su Yuan* were built in cities where land was not plentiful. This of course is true in Portland, and *Lan Su Yuan* was built on one square Portland block, or 40,000 square feet. The challenge for garden designers is how to create the illusion of greater space - to make finite space seem infinite. This is accomplished by placing features in a manner that makes it difficult to see the entire garden. Most views are obstructed, so that you see many layers of plants and structures, often through framed openings, sparing the feelings of confinement. Here you can notice the layers of views as you look to the north: *Double Rainbow Resting in the Clouds Bridge*, *Locking the Moon Pavilion*, *Tower of Cosmic Reflections*, and finally, the piled rock mountain forming the northern wall.

Fragrance Courtyard

This is the first of two courtyards leading to the Scholar's Study. Both the outer and inner courtyards contain fragrant plantings that provide the scholar with wonderful scents while he works in his study. In the *Courtyard of Permeating Fragrance*, there is mock orange, honeysuckle, gardenia, wintersweet, and jasmine, each blossoming at different times of the year. Here, as is true throughout the garden, the experience is “never twice the same.”

The poetic inscription over the moon gate says “Read the Landscape.” On the opposite side, the inscription reads “Listen to the Fragrance.” These phrases remind us to use all of our five senses—in extraordinary ways—to fully enjoy the Garden. The drip tiles found here and throughout the garden gives us practice in enlivening our senses. The design of the drip tiles results in the rainwater falling like a “beaded curtain” or “cascade of pearls.” Traditionally, broad-leafed plants are placed beneath the tiles. When it rains, beads of water falling onto the plants produce a fragrant melody in the moving landscape.

In addition, the drip tiles are an authentic Ming design in the shape of a bat, with the character *shou* (long life) encircled by five bats. The Chinese word for bat is *fu*, which sounds like the word for “happiness” or “good fortune,” so the bat is used to symbolize those wishes. The five bats represent the Five Blessings: long life, wealth, health, love of virtue, and natural death.

Scholar's Courtyard

In the Scholar's Courtyard several “leak windows” are easily visible. Traditionally, these would only be in the interior walls of the Garden to “leak” a view from one area to another, expanding small spaces. But, to comply with a city “blank wall” ordinance, the designers placed windows in the outside walls as well. There are fifty-two such windows in the Garden, some featuring designs of botanicals or animals, and no two are exactly alike.

The mosaic underfoot is called *Plum Blossoms on Cracked Ice*. Two plum trees grow against the outside wall near the study. In the late winter their blossoms drop on the courtyard. Because the plum tree blossoms in spite of winter, it symbolizes moral strength and integrity, highly-revered scholarly virtues. Incidentally, its plums make the sauce that is used for *moo shoo* pork and other delicacies.

The Scholar's Study

Inside the *Hall of Permeating Fragrance* is found a day bed and Ming dynasty-style chairs, furniture that would have been used by the scholar while chatting with friends, likely other scholar gentry. They might engage in friendly intellectual competition like the “couplet game” in which one person provides the first line of a two-line poem and another comes up with the second line to complete it. An example of a Chinese

couplet appears on the two columns on either side of the day bed. The characters on the right read: “Ten thousand flowers dare to blossom in the snow”, and those on the left, “A single tree leads the world in greeting the spring”. Note the parallel in the sentence structure.

The view from the octagonal window in the scholar’s inner study looks out on the pavilion with the view called *Half a Window in Lush Green*. Here you can imagine visiting a Chinese scholar official, during the late Ming dynasty, as he uses his study for the artistic pursuits of the “Three Perfections”—calligraphy, painting, and poetry. Scholar officials were life-long learners who were committed to cultivating their inner character—their strengths and virtues—through the development of their artistic expressions.

Flowers Bathing in Spring Rain

This pavilion’s most distinctive feature is the six-panel ginkgo screen. The panels represent famous Suzhou scenes, four of them from Suzhou gardens. The second panel from the right depicts *Wang Shi Yuan* (the Master of the Nets Garden), *Lan Su Yuan*’s sister garden. On the reverse of the panels are poetic inscriptions about the scenes in various Chinese calligraphic styles.

Painted Boat in Misty Rain

The *Painted Boat in Misty Rain* symbolizes the moods of pleasure and ease. Surrounded by willows, rockeries, and a large body of water, the boat evokes freedom and remoteness from the city. The designer of *Lan Su Yuan* also said that it represents a boat filled with friendship that set out from Suzhou and docked in Portland.

Tower of Cosmic Reflections

This is the only two-story building in the Garden. In a garden tower like this, the second floor is traditionally the place from which the women of the family would view theatrical performances taking place on the terrace below. Our tower serves as our teahouse, operated by the *Tao of Tea* company. You can enjoy traditional Chinese teas personally selected by the *Tao of Tea*, many from long-standing *camellia sinensis* tea plants found in China. Their antique furniture, music, and incense wonderfully complement the high quality of their teas, providing a very evocative Ming dynasty atmosphere. They also serve snacks and lunches.

Lan Su Yuan is “never twice the same.” We hope you *Enter the Wonderland* to experience the moving beauty for yourself.