



Portland Classical Chinese Garden The Five Elements: PLANTS

Three plants—a pine tree, a plum tree and a grove of bamboo—greet visitors in the Entry Plaza of *Lan Su Yuan*, the Portland Classical Chinese Garden. The Chinese call them ‘The Three Friends of Winter’ because they show their needles, flowers or leaves during the coldest months of winter bringing the hope that spring is not far away. From the *Knowing the Fish Pavilion* visitors can see a small grove of moso bamboo, the largest bamboo grown for timber. Bamboo reminds us of some of the many uses of plants: beauty of nature, building materials, food and—in Chinese culture—a model for virtuous (good) human behavior. During the summer months, Zither Lake becomes a water garden full of tall, graceful lotus plants. In Chinese culture, to live close to nature is a source of inspiration for the eyes, the mind, and the spirit.

Plants in the Chinese Garden tell stories of science, history, and culture. For instance, from the scholar’s study in the Chinese Garden, a banana tree (*Musa basjoo*) can be seen through the carved pattern of the window frame. It is planted here on purpose because the banana acts as a symbol of the years of hard work it took to become a high-ranking official. History books tell of many serious Chinese students who would carefully practice their calligraphy brush strokes on banana leaves because they could not afford paper or silk (both Chinese inventions). In addition, banana leaves helped the scholar concentrate as he painted and wrote poetry. He would listen to the rain drumming on the leaves and the wind rustling the leaves and hear the peaceful sounds of nature’s music.

China is known for the huge number of different plant species. The country is the native home of more than 30,000 plant species— nearly one-eighth of the world’s total. Through the efforts of brave plant collectors, many have been transplanted across the globe.

The leaves of a Chinese evergreen shrub—the *Camellia sinensis*—enjoys wide popularity as a beverage as the leaves are found brewing in teapots across the world. It was on tea clipper trading ships beginning in the late 15th century, that most of the popular Chinese garden plants were brought to Europe, and then to gardens here in the United States.

Activities for Learning from Plants

1. Learning from the Three Friends of Winter—Background Reading

According to Chinese tradition, humans and the natural world should behave in much the same ways. To become a good, honest and upright (ethical) person, one must study the character of plants and other elements. Therefore, scholars would cultivate or grow special plants in their garden that were symbols of the virtues they valued.

At *Lan Su Yuan*, The Portland Chinese Garden, visitors can observe many of these plants. Perhaps the best known among them is a trio—pine, bamboo, and plum—called the *Three Friends of Winter*. Pine trees never lose their needles under harsh conditions and under pressure. From the pine, the scholar learns to not give up when times are tough—the virtues of endurance and strength. Plum trees sense the first signs of winter's thaw; even when other trees have only bare branches the plum tree shows its delicate flowers against the cold sky. From the plum, the scholar learns the virtue of courage.

Finally, the bamboo bends in strong winds, yet always returns to an upright position without breaking. From bamboo, the scholar learns to 'bend but not to break'. That is, he knows how to be flexible in his actions and in his thinking, without giving in to outside pressures. Being able to bend in a storm but not break is a symbol of integrity.

Pine, Plum and Bamboo: The Three Friends of Winter—Activity

Create a chart like the one below and complete it yourself after reading about the pine, plum, and bamboo in the above background reading.

Friend of Winter.	Virtues displayed by the plant	Lessons a scholar can learn from the plant
1		
2		
3		

2. Learn to Communicate Messages using Chinese Plants

There are many hidden meanings found in Chinese decorative arts. Whether in paintings, on clothing, or portrayed on objects for home use or for aesthetic pleasure, these symbols have traditionally meant good fortune for a Chinese family. Many of the symbols that contain hidden meanings on Chinese art forms are plants and flowers.

Many plants are seen to contain the virtues that bring about good fortune. (See *The Three Friends of Winter* above.) However, sometimes it is the Chinese name of a plant sounds very much like another Chinese character, creating a pun on words. For example, bamboo may not only represent the virtue of humility and integrity. The Chinese name for bamboo is pronounced *zhu*. In Chinese, *zhu* is also the way to say ‘congratulate.’ Therefore, when you see a painting of bamboo and chrysanthemums (symbols of longevity) it is sending the message ‘Birthday Greetings’ —a way of congratulating someone for living longer!

Create a set of greeting cards using the hidden meanings in Chinese botanicals.

- a. Consult the chart below to learn about how ‘Chinese Plants Bow with Meaning.’
- b. Using the PDF file, ‘Chinese Plants Bow With Meaning,’ **create a set of greeting cards that communicate a hidden meaning to send to your family and friends.** You can try your hand at making original drawings of these plants and flowers. Another way to make the cards would be to print them from your computer, color them, and create your own message.

Chinese Plants Bow with Meaning

Bamboo (竹zhu): Flexibility and Integrity and Peace

Straight on the outside and hollow inside is a symbol for integrity; bends but does not break

Plum Blossoms (梅花meihua): Courage

Five Petals of Plum Blossom: Five Blessings in Life--

Health, Happiness, Wealth, Living with Integrity, Long Life

Pine (松song): Endurance, Strength

Chrysanthemum (菊花juhua): Longevity, Good Health

Chrysanthemum with Bamboo: Congratulations and Birthday Greetings

Chrysanthemum with Pine: May you increase your long life—Birthday Greetings

Boys flying a kite: Success; ‘May you rise with the spring wind’; Success in career

Lily (百合baihe): Harmony, togetherness, unity; a symbol of 100

Lotus (荷花hehua or 莲花lianhua): Purity and Harmony

Lotus with Mandarin Duck: Happy Marriage (Mandarin Ducks mate for life)

Two lotus blossoms on one stem (并蒂莲bingdilian): Harmony

Peony (牡丹mudan, 富贵花fuguihua): Wealth and Honor

Peony and moon (月yue): Perfection

Butterflies (蝴蝶hudie) flying among flowers: Joy, Love, Blessings

Clouds (云yun): Good Fortune, High Achievement

Bat (蝠fu): Happiness, Blessings

Bats and Clouds: Good Fortune, Success from Hard Work

Fish (yu): Abundance, Surplus, Plenty

3. Conduct Research on the Camellia senensis Tea Plant

a. History of Tea in China

The Chinese have enjoyed tea for thousands of years. Chinese stories about the discovery of tea often date back to the time of Emperor Shen Nong (or Nung or other spellings) in 2737 BCE and tell of a stray leaf from a Camellia senensis plant that fell into a pot of boiling water. History tells of Buddhist monks who brewed tea to help them meditate. What role did Yunnan Province play in the cultivation of tea? How did Lu Yu, a Chinese scholar in the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE/AD) promote the culture of brewing a proper cup of tea? **What else can you discover about the origins of how this plant has become the world's most popular beverage?**

b. Green Tea, Black Tea, White Tea and Oolong Tea

The same plant—Camellia senensis—is cultivated to produce distinctly different kinds of tea. What makes green tea different from black tea? What makes white tea different from green tea? How is oolong tea produced? What difference does it make if the tea leaves are harvested in the early morning? **Research.....**

- * **The geography** of where tea plants are grown and harvested
- * **The process of growing** tea plants
- * **The stages of drying** the leaves of tea plants
- * **The exposure to oxygen** of tea leaves during processing
- * **The special methods** of making the hundreds of different varieties of tea such as the famed Dragon Well tea, the infusion of scented flower blossoms, or the hand-rolled Jasmine Pearls
- * **What else can you discover about the world's most popular beverage?**

Note: Explore the Tao of Tea website: <http://www.taoftea.com/> (Click on Tea Education or Teaware and more). The Tao of Tea is located in the Teahouse inside the Portland Classical Chinese Garden.

c. Gong Fu Tea Ceremony

Gong Fu (or gongfu or gung-fu) literally means "tea brewed with great skill." The preparation of each cup of tea very special. **Research.....**

- * What are the **special steps** of preparing tea in the gongfu style?
- * What kinds of **tea pot and tea cups** are used?
- * Are there **special tools** needed?
- * How does this **special care** produce tea that heightens the pleasure for people drinking the tea?

d. Finding Peace in a Cup of Tea.

Prepare a pot of tea. Perhaps you will follow the steps of the gong fu ceremony. Perhaps you will invent your own ceremony for tea preparation. Fill each cup with care. Sit and sip in quiet and calmness. Discover for yourself the qualities of tea that can bring peace and vitality to your day. Write a poem about your personal tea ceremony.

The Seven Cups of Tea

The first cup caresses my dry lips and throat.
The second shatters the walls of my lonely sadness.
The third searches the dry rivulets of my soul to find the stories of five thousand scrolls.
With the fourth the pain of life's grievances evaporates through my pores.
The fifth relaxes my muscles and bones become light.
With the sixth I find the path that leads to the immortal ancestors.
Oh the seventh cup! Better not take it! If I had it the only feeling
Is the fresh wind blowing through my wings,
As I make my way to Penglai.

Written by Lu Tong (798-835)
upon tasting cakes of Imperial tea



Gung-fu Ceremony in the Tao of Tea inside the Portland Classical Chinese Garden