

A Sense of Place

**Pacific Northwest grandeur
and a sensitive rendering of the Japanese
esthetic meet in this serene garden**

BY ELAINE JONES PHOTO STUART MCCALL

spaces along with the rooflines of the house and carport reveal his influence on modern Western architecture.

When Michael bought the house, the gardens were in poor condition. Ronald had often used Japanese landscaping to enhance his architecture, but over the years, the property had deteriorated; it was Michael's vision to bring both house and garden into alignment with Ronald's original conception. He had already removed part of the gardens due to construction when an interview with Yoshihiro Kawasaki, who operates Zen Gardens with his wife, Dorothy Kennedy, convinced Michael that Yoshi was the right person for the job.

The first thing to greet visitors is the sound of moving water. Yoshi says the main pond, or stream, was the most challenging aspect of the design and one of the things he likes best about the garden. "It's modernistic," he says. "Michael and I wanted it to connect to the lines of the house as well as the traditions of the Japanese garden." A little over a metre (4 ft.) wide and nine metres (30 ft.) long, mimicking the spare rectilinear lines of the house and its windows, the pond is constructed of concrete and painted black. Gently descending levels represent waterfalls in a river. The focal points are a stone lantern and three large rocks set in the stream. This rock trio is



FROM THE STREET, this could be almost any home in the forested lower levels of the North Shore Mountains. Cobbled paving fronts a double garage and the rest of the

property is hidden behind a 15-foot-tall laurel hedge – a deliberate move on the part of the homeowner. But just a few steps inside is a secluded retreat a world away from suburbia.

Michael Smith bought the property in 1990. The house itself is of historical interest (Michael won a District of North Vancouver heritage award in 2006 for its restoration).

Vancouver architect Ronald Thom designed the house for interior designer Rudy Kovach, and Bill Reid had his studio in the lower level in the 1970s. The three

friends are said to have collaborated on the design; known as The Art House, it was completed around 1963. Ronald's liberal use of glass to connect inside and outside

echoed throughout the garden; minimal plantings of sweet flag (*Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon'), lilies and iris accent the stream without overwhelming it.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A small zenigata style water basin often found in tea gardens. Garden designer Yoshihiro Kawasaki and his wife, Dorothy Kennedy, maintain the garden. Fence detail in the side garden. The traditional grouping of three rocks is set in the gravel pathway, rather than the garden. Square concrete stepping stones echo the modern lines of the house. *Houttuynia cordata* 'Chameleon'. A rock garden connects the balcony space to the Seymour River far below. Opposite: Behind a curved yotsumegaki-style bamboo fence, water flows from a large bamboo spout into a graceful stone basin.



Past the pond lies the main garden. Constructed as a "stroll" garden, the intent is to wander slowly along the path and contemplate each aspect of the garden in a leisurely way. Square concrete stepping stones set into the gravel paths, chosen instead of the more traditional natural rock, carry through the lines of the house and stream.

Though the 13- by 18-m (43- by 60-ft.) garden is relatively small, it feels much larger because of the "borrowed view," an important element in Japanese garden design. In

the distance, across a deep ravine, is a thickly treed, steeply descending hillside. Low plantings alongside the path, including heather, *Rhododendron* 'Purple Gem', dwarf kalmia, dwarf iris, euonymus and several ornamental grasses, frame the scene and make it part of the garden.

When Yoshi first visited the site his attention was immediately drawn to a large natural rock outcropping flanked by two towering cedars. This, he felt, was the heart of the garden. "You feel immediately if a place is suitable for a



Japanese garden,” he says. “This already had many elements – rock, moss, evergreens. That part was not a challenge.” Yoshi also liked the rooflines of the carport, which reminded him of the teahouses in Kyoto, where he lived and studied his art.

A grouping of three rocks is a focal point in traditional Japanese gardens, says Yoshi: “a large upright rock, a horizontal rock and a smaller vertical rock, representing heaven, earth and humankind.” Rather than making the arrangement itself the main focal point, he installed the rocks in the gravel of the path in front of the natural outcropping to draw attention to the feature nature placed there. Throughout the garden, rough-hewn rocks such as these have been carefully handpicked for their shape from a local landscape supplier; they were able to find just-right rounded ones on the property.

The garden is spectacular in spring, when azaleas, rhodos and camellias put on their show. But it is also lovely through summer

and into fall, when the textures and rhythm of the plantings are showcased. In one bed, limey-green, low-growing *Pachysandra procumbens* surrounds the base of a cedar. The pale greyish-green leaves of a hardy fuchsia form a contrast, its delicate, red, late-summer blooms adding a subtle accent. Other contrasts of height and colour are the dark leaves of a single ‘Brunette’ cimicifuga with its tall flower spike and the white flowerheads of gooseneck loosestrife (*Lysimachia clethroides*). A native huckleberry bush with a few lingering red fruits grows out of a stump, another link to the natural setting.

All the garden beds are bordered with *Ophiopogon japonicus* ‘Nanus’. In Japan, this is the standard edging, say Yoshi and Dorothy. It’s not as easy to find here and it’s expensive, but it’s a hardy and no-fuss plant. At this stage of the relatively young garden, it mostly forms a uniform border, but as it grows into the other groundcovers, it is beginning to create an undulating, more naturalistic edging.

Off to one side a bench set in a nook beckons. The graceful multiple trunks of *Acer shirasawanum* ‘Aureum’ form part of this shaded woodland setting, one of several small maples in the garden.

Exiting the main garden, one admires a small azalea and osmanthus, offset from one another, planted in the gravel pathway. They function as a means to slow the passage of those strolling through.

The narrow garden at the other side of the house has its own charm and is another favourite of both Yoshi and Michael. It is made to look larger with the clever use of perspective. Viewed from the kitchen window, the shape of the bed changes from narrow to wider, giving it visual depth. The very small scale of the bamboo fence separating the bed from the paving also gives the illusion of size.

At the back of the house is what informs both house and garden: a breathtaking view of the hillside and the Seymour River rushing past some 30 metres (100 ft.) below. From this



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A bench for contemplation is set in a nook off the path around the stroll garden. A wall of blackstem bamboo (*Phyllostachys nigra*) that screens the neighbouring house creates a serene ambient green light. A rough-hewn staircase, made from a cedar log left on the property from logging days, leads through the native forest. Michael Smith and his wife, Nancy, relax in the garden. *Hydrangea macrophylla* ‘Pink Elf’.

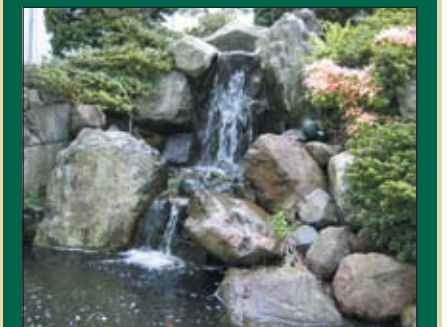


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TOP: Lush plantings include camellia, ornamental grasses, rhododendrons, azaleas, variegated whorled loosestrife *Lysimachia punctata* 'Alexander', and coralbark maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku').
Bottom: The main pool features a stone lantern and clumps of *Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon' and Japanese iris.

perspective it's possible to believe there is nothing but wilderness for miles and miles around.

Yoshi has wisely not competed with the natural landscape; instead he's created a subtle homage to the river. The pavers on one balcony enclose a "river" of stones. Embedded are rocks from the river's edge and an *okidoro* – a stone lantern set atop a rock. You can look past this carefully constructed river to the Seymour River below – an artful combining of man-made and natural beauty.

Forethought is key to the success of any garden. Yoshi took a full year, working with Michael, to finalize the design of the garden before beginning construction. The plan takes advantage of the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest while employing the principles of traditional Japanese design. For Yoshi, the main challenge was to do justice to the setting: "The site was inspirational."

Michael adds, "Yoshi's genius was to design different garden spaces for each side of the house; the house works better because the garden flows around it. Landscapers often forget this point – that they are designing an environment, not just a garden to look at." The garden won the 2007 Heritage Landscape Award for the District of North Vancouver.

Architect Arthur Erickson has the last word. He writes:

In my library, there is a poem by the Qing scholar Wang Chuntian, that translates as "improving a garden is more difficult than correcting a poem."

Ron Thom's Smith residence in North



Vancouver, house and garden, has been restored as a single, unified poetic space, inspired by the keen observation of nature.

What was initially created – and now rediscovered – reminds me of the Japanese concern with mood, mood as part of nature, part of man, elusive, changing, and poignant. This sensitivity has helped to determine the esthetic qualities of the house in and of its surroundings, inspiring an architectural language drawn from the spirit of place. Michael Smith is dedicated to ensuring that the spirit and poetics of place continue to be honoured. ■

The following plants are hardy to the zone number indicated (turn to page 6 for our zone chart): *Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku' – zone 6 • *Acer shirasawanum* 'Aureum' (golden fullmoon maple) – zone 6 • *Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon' (variegated sweet flag) – zone 6 • *Actaea simplex* var. *simplex* 'Brunette' – zone 5 • *Fuchsia magellanica* cultivar 'Riccartonii' (hardy fuchsia) – zone 8 • *Houttuynia cordata* 'Chameleon' – zone 5 (aggressive spreader) • *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Pink Elf' – zone 5 • *Iris setosa* var. *arctica* (Arctic iris) – zone 2 • *Kalmia latifolia* 'Elf' (dwarf mountain laurel) – zone 5 • *Lysimachia clethroides* (goose-neck loosestrife) – zone 4 • *Lysimachia punctata* 'Alexander' (variegated whorled loosestrife) – zone 4 (aggressive spreader) • *Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Nanus' – zone 7 • *Pachysandra procumbens* – zone 7 • *Phyllostachys nigra* (blackstem bamboo) – zone 7 • *Rhododendron* 'Purple Gem' – zone 5 • *Vaccinium parvifolium* (red huckleberry) – zone 5




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