



GARDENS OF REFLECTION: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF SHADE, SACRED, TEMPLE, AND ZEN GARDEN DESIGNS

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Introduction

Gardens have long been spaces of beauty, contemplation, and spiritual connection, with different cultures and traditions expressing these values through distinct design styles. Among the most revered garden types are Shade Gardens, Temple Gardens, Sacred Gardens, and Zen Gardens, each offering a unique environment that fosters reflection and tranquillity. These gardens may differ in their specific purpose, whether it is to provide respite from the sun, serve as sacred spaces for religious practices, or act as tools for meditation, yet they share an overarching aim: to create an atmosphere of peace and introspection. By combining the principles of these garden designs, it is possible to craft a holistic sanctuary that draws on the strengths of each tradition, offering a rich experience for both body and mind.

Shade gardens

Shade gardens are a kind of garden developed in places with little or no sunlight. These types of gardens can be found under trees or along the sides of structures or walls either as a natural phenomenon or as a conscious arrangement. This type of gardening has its advantages and disadvantages, largely because only a few species can survive in the shade while in most cases the competition is for light. As most edible crops require sunlight, most shade gardens are ornamental in nature, although it can be challenging to grow even ornamental plants in the presence of a thick canopy. Very light shade is referred to simply as “dappled sun.”



Types of Shade

Partial shade results from objects that obstruct sunlight such as manmade structures (buildings, walls) or natural forms (hillsides) for certain hours of the day. East-facing sites that enjoys the cooler sun during morning welcomes more shade plants. Opposite sites facing westward are likely to receive direct hot sun in the afternoons which subjects the foliage to burning and other stresses.

Dappled shade comes mostly under a tree's canopy where some shade is provided, while the rest is well lit and creates the sun-dance effect throughout the day. The species of the tree and the diameter of the tree's canopy defines how much shade is provided.

Full shade indicates a spot that is almost devoid of sunlight or entirely devoid of sunlight. This can be the case for the part of the house that is along its northern edge, inside a small enclosed space, within tall buildings in a city, or beneath a solid structure such as the top of a shade or an awning.

How to Plant a shade garden

Soil: It is critical to keep proper drainage and nutrient levels in the soil for the growth of plants. Most forest or shade-loving plants would do well in a well-draining mix that is a little on the acidic side, and which is enriched with compost or other organic matter.

- Choose the right plants for your site. Find those plants that prefer shade and will do well in your location.
- Do not plant sensitive plants like hostas in locations that will be subjected to hot afternoon sun, as that will scorch their leaves.
- Plants beneath large trees would need to compete for water and nutrients. So, in those areas, plant hardy plants that do well in dry shade like bigroot geranium (*G. macrorrhizum*), bugleweed (*Ajuga*) or bishop's hat (*Epimedium*).
- Also incorporate shade tolerant spring blooming bulbs for interest during the early seasons.
- Think outside the box. In such cases of thick tree or shrub roots, it is better to plant in pots instead of the ground.

Shade garden care tips

Plants that are suited for growing in shade, are usually less demanding than the ones that grow on sunlight. Some ideas:

Water: A shade garden dries out more slowly, so will need less water. Large trees do create shady spots; however, these areas tend to dry up much quicker as the trees will absorb the water.

Fertilize: It is not uncommon for plants that live in the shade to be less nourished with fertilizers since their growth rate is rather low.

Weeding: Fewer weeding activities are experienced in a shade garden because most weeds will require sunlight to thrive. Use mulch as it helps in fighting off the weeds.

Pruning: Remove any unsightly features in a shady area such as dead or infected twigs and knocked leaves.

Temple Garden

In order to shield the images of deities from the elements, the earliest shrines are believed to have been constructed. They were not designed for worship in gatherings. With the advancement of Temple architecture, Temples began to take up enough space, that its ambience began to be compared to that of a park. This was even more so when Temples barred the public and only the priests would reside within the protective walls. The Temple of Hatshepsut and Mentuhotep in Egypt and the Temple of Hephaistos in Greece have been found to have planting sites which makes them unique. Buddhism apparently teaches that it is acceptable to have temples with increasing number of gardens. This is because Buddha reflected under the trees in the park. These temples are located in India, China, Japan and other parts of South East Asia. Temples of ancient Egypt: the preserved gardens number among the oldest. They were for the use of priests and pharaohs alike and their payers, however, might be allowed in during the celebrations.

The temple design and elaboration taught the cosmological as well as the sociological ordering of space and its better understanding as we do today by science, religion, arts, history, and politics. The temple courts are the most ancient continuance of the aspiration that it should be possible to create statues in the open space, shrines and other constructions all over the landscape. Sacred groves could be in the vicinity of temple courts. Erected axial lines although they were all asymmetrical in shape. Distinct rectangular enclosures bordered by tall walls were where temples were raised. Temples had wide avenues connecting them decorated with trees, sphinxes, and statues. Some of the fenced off land was designated for building purposes, for instance, to raise store houses. Compounds in addition also contained, holy lakes, basins, statues, altars, vegetable and flower beds. The main building materials used were stones and mud bricks.



Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple, New Delhi

Sacred Garden

The practice of creating the sacred gardens has been existent in almost all great civilizations including ours since time immemorial. The sacred gardens are cultivated versions of the sacred woods and serve as places for reflection, enlightenment, and festivity. Still, there is scanty archaeological evidence of such early developments in Indian gardens. However, the ancient Hindu scriptures and literature (for example, Ramayana, Abijnana Shakuntalam, Mrichchakatika and so on) provide vivid images of well-structured gardens with beds of flowers, fountains of lotus, trees laden with fruits, creepers, and shady areas. Indeed, garden is one of the most elevated representations of the concept of Heaven according to the Hindu philosophy and art.



Types of Sacred Garden

Nandavanam

As can be seen in most of the temples, the Divine pastimes of the Hindu Gods termed as leela are often performed in gardens. Most of the traditional Hindu Temples are, therefore, places with associated Nandavanams or gardens. Due to this reason, almost all such gardens are

constructed and they help in the activities of the temple. For example, the Thirunandavanam or Madurakavi nandavanam associated with the Srirangam Ranganathar temple.

Buddhistic gardens

Gardens in Buddhism are said to be for calming and healing purposes. During the time, gardens flourished in Nalanda and Taxila. It is also said that Siddhartha, the historical Buddha, was born in a garden (now found as part of Nepal) called Lumbini, which is a UNESCO world heritage garden today. Gardens were integral to the life in the monasteries in the early times as well.

Bagh (Bagicha)

They are ethno-silvi-horticultural terraces found near tanks, settlements or otherwise forested areas and cultivated for many generations in the northern regions of our country. The flora consists primarily of economically useful trees like *Mangifera indica*, *Madhuca latifolia*, *Syzygium cuminii*, etc. Green felling or cutting of green trees is strictly prohibited in such type of gardens. Moreover, there either exists a shrine or a dedicated enclosure for the Gods (as in for the village God).

Gardens of Paradise

The Mughals Gardens are built square or in rectangular forms similar to that of the Persian Gardens. These protrude from the main structure into the boundaries of these walls with aesthetically pleasing gates placed at all four corners. It is a view of the Garden, Allah's paradise in an organized manner. These are found mainly with burials since it is believed that the person in den was taken to heaven and that is imitated in the form of a garden inside the premises. Such a garden attached to a tomb is referred to as Char Bagh which is formulated on hasht-vihisht design which contains eight paradises and creates a cross-axial garden layout.

Sacred gardens of Tamilnadu

- ❖ Koodal Azhagar Kovil.
- ❖ Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple.
- ❖ Mannargudi Rajagopalswamy Temple.

- ❖ Srirangam Madurakavi Nandavanam.
- ❖ Srivilliputhur Andal Nandavanam.

Zen Garden

Japanese dry garden, or Japanese rock garden, often referred to as a Zen garden, is a unique type of Japanese garden. It is designed to create a miniature stylized land with carefully arranged rocks, water bodies, moss, trimmed tree and shrub, and gravel or sand which is raked to look like serene water ripples in motion. Zen gardens are mostly situated in temples or monasteries. A zen garden is generally small in size, often with a restricting wall or buildings, and is ideally viewed while seated from a single leverage point outside the zen garden for example a porch of the hojo which is the head monk's residence in the temple or monastery. Many of which are fraught with gravel instead of sod, are rarely if ever walked green. Classical zen gardens were designed and built in the temples of zen Buddhism of Kyoto in the muromachi period. They were believed to capture the spirit of landscape rather than its realistic version and were meant to facilitate focus while meditating.



Ryoanji temple in Kyoto in Japan

Conclusion:

The fusion of Shade Gardens, Temple Gardens, Sacred Gardens, and Zen Gardens offers a compelling framework for designing a garden that serves as a place of reflection, peace, and harmony. By borrowing elements from each of these traditions, it is possible to create a space that combines the cooling, restful qualities of

shade gardens with the spiritual resonance of sacred and temple gardens, all while incorporating the simplicity and mindfulness of Zen design. In a world that often feels fast-paced and overwhelming, such gardens serve as sanctuaries where individuals can reconnect with nature, reflect on deeper meanings, and find inner peace. Through thoughtful design that respects the essence of each garden type, these "Gardens of Reflection" become more than just landscapes they become spaces that invite contemplation and spiritual growth. Whether one seeks refuge from the physical elements, a sacred space for worship, or a quiet corner for meditation, these gardens provide a harmonious blend of all these needs, grounding us in both the natural and the transcendent.

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