Engaging With the Morris Arboretum's Japanese Gardens

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Title: Engaging with Morris Arboretum’s Japanese Gardens

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*The McLean Contributionship Endowed Education Intern*

Date: April 2020

Abstract:

The Japanese influence visible at the Morris Arboretum plays an important role in the Arboretum’s history and landscape, yet there are limited educational resources available for visitors to learn about and engage with these spaces. This project focused on creating compelling, new interpretive materials for visitors to learn about the various Japanese gardens and features throughout the Arboretum. These new materials consist of a sign for the once-present Japanese Tea House, an updated version of the previous Hill and Water Garden sign, three additional signs for the Hill and Water Garden, a Japanese elements scavenger hunt, and an online Japanese elements self-guided tour.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1
BACKGROUND ..................................................................................................................... 2
PROJECT OBJECTIVE .......................................................................................................... 3
SIGNAGE ............................................................................................................................... 4
  Creation Process ............................................................................................................... 4
  Results ............................................................................................................................. 6
JAPANESE ELEMENTS SELF-GUIDED TOUR ................................................................. 10
  Creation Process ............................................................................................................ 10
  Results .......................................................................................................................... 10
JAPANESE ELEMENTS SCAVENGER HUNT ................................................................. 10
  Creation Process ............................................................................................................ 10
  Results .......................................................................................................................... 11
CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................................... 13
REFERENCES ..................................................................................................................... 14
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...................................................................................................... 15

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. “Previous Hill and Water Garden Sign” ............................................................. 1
Figure 2. “New Hill and Water Garden Sign” ................................................................. 6
Figure 3. “Japanese Elements: Stones Sign” ................................................................. 7
Figure 4. “Japanese Elements: Water Sign” ................................................................. 8
Figure 5. “Japanese Elements: Plants Sign” ................................................................. 9
Figure 6. “The Japanese Tea House Sign” ................................................................. 10
Figure 6. “Japanese Elements Scavenger Hunt Clues” ............................................. 12
INTRODUCTION

This project began with the need to update the signage in the Hill and Water Garden and the Overlook Garden at Morris Arboretum. One morning I went out to examine the condition of the signs standing in these gardens and found faded, barely legible signs. After muttering a quick “yikes!” to myself, I took pictures of the signs and brought them back to my office to decipher their content.

Figure 1. “Previous Hill and Water Garden Sign.”

After lots of squinting and use of zoom, I managed to make out the text. I became particularly intrigued by the content of the Hill and Water Garden sign. I wanted to know more about the elements present in this garden and those that, according to the sign, make up all Japanese gardens. I found myself asking, what were the symbolic meanings and purposes of these garden elements? Thus, I reported back to the Morris Arboretum Interpretation Committee with a proposal to re-do the one sign in the Hill and Water garden and to create four additional signs for the garden to explain the eight Japanese garden elements mentioned on the current sign. Additionally, drawing on my own love for mindfulness and meditation, I proposed that these signs offer short mindfulness practices to encourage visitors to use their senses to experience the garden. (This idea later evolved into creating just three additional signs to cover the three most basic Japanese garden elements: stones, water, and plants). We agreed that this would become my project and that the committee would re-do the Overlook Garden signage as an adjacent project.
Through my research I discovered the Japanese Elements Tour created by Larry Godley, an Arboretum volunteer, for guides to give visitors during the Arboretum’s annual Cherry Blossom Days event. While reading, I was amazed by how many Japanese garden elements Morris Arboretum had, many of which I had no idea were even Japanese. It started to become evident that John and Lydia Morris, the original stewards of what is now Morris Arboretum, were enamored by the Japanese garden style and that these features played an important role in Morris Arboretum’s history. Yet, this tour, which is only available to the public twice a year, was the only information I had ever seen explaining this story. Thus, as a project addendum, I proposed to re-visit the text for this tour, make any necessary updates, then create a digitized version accessible to the public as an online, self-guided tour. In the desire to also create something around the topic of Japanese gardens for children, I decided to create a Japanese elements scavenger hunt as well, inspired by the Japanese Elements Tour.

During an Interpretation Committee meeting, we were reading through the text updates I had made to the Japanese Elements Tour, when Bob Gutowski, Director of Education, proposed the idea of creating a sign for the Japanese Tea House that once stood on the Morrises’ property. We had text from the Japanese Elements Tour and some fantastic pictures available in the Archives. I loved the idea, thinking that it would be great for people taking the Japanese Elements Tour to have something to look at on this stop. Thus, creating a sign for the Japanese Tea House site was added to my project to-do list. It was now time to get working!

**BACKGROUND**

Morris Arboretum’s beginnings can be traced back to 1887 when brother and sister John and Lydia Morris purchased property to build their summer home, which they called Compton. In 1898, the Morrises began the construction of their first garden feature, the Japanese Tea House Garden. From then until 1912, John and Lydia added four other garden features to the property, all of which were Japanese influenced: The Rock Garden in the Fernery, the Hill and Water Garden, the Overlook Garden, and the Rock Pond behind the katsura tree (Munro, 2018, 2019). These became highly respected and praised gardens by the community. An article in *American Suburbs* from 1910 described the Rock Garden at Compton as “an eminently successful piece of Japanese Gardening” (*The Pool*, 1910).

In commissioning these gardens, John and Lydia Morris can be said to have been products of their time, as most of America was in a “Japanese craze” as a result of the 1876 Centennial Exhibition. Before 1876, most Americans had likely never seen or experienced Japanese culture, because until 1854, Japan was closed to Westerners to protect Japanese traditions. In 1868, a shift in power in Japan resulted in an ideological shift, where the new goal for Japan was to “come into the modern age” in the name of national survival. By 1876, Japan had made many changes and saw the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition as the perfect vehicle to show the world the new Japan. Like other countries invited to the exhibition, Japan sent artwork, architecture, garden exhibits, machinery and more to the Centennial, with the hopes
of impressing those attending. Japan was successful in doing so, as people were so captivated by the Japanese exhibit that there were reverberations of the Japanese style in Western culture for years to come (Ujifusa 2010, Sharp 2017).

This is not to say that John and Lydia were merely reacting to what was culturally in style at the time. The Archives show that it was likely that John and Lydia were genuinely fascinated and intrigued by Japanese culture. Lydia is thought to have attended the centennial with her mother, which may have left a lasting effect on her. Additionally, both John and Lydia traveled to Japan in 1891, as part of their “around the world tour,” and likely became further inspired by the Japanese style on this trip. In fact, the Japanese Tea House was purchased on this visit to Japan and sent back to Compton to be reconstructed (Munro, 2019).

Japanese-style gardens, which John and Lydia likely saw at the Centennial and on their travels, are unique because they are created to be appreciated from a distance and looked at like a painting. This means that careful attention is given to creating and maintaining every aspect of the garden. For example, specific plants and non-plant elements, such as stone lanterns and bridges, are chosen and placed through the landscape to ensure yearlong interest. Additionally, Japanese gardens are often created to be miniature replicas of a larger, more expansive landscape, either real or mythical. That means that garden elements, such as stones or water, act as metaphors for features found in the natural world, such as mountains or rivers. While there are many elements used in Japanese-style gardens, the three most basic elements are stones, water, and plants (Conder 1893, Lewis 2019).

**PROJECT OBJECTIVES**

The Japanese gardens and features in the Arboretum left by John and Lydia give us a unique snapshot of this moment in history and the Morrises’ personal interest in Japanese culture. However, if you were to visit Morris Arboretum today, you might leave not with the impression that Japanese gardens play a prominent role in the landscape, or that John and Lydia were so taken by Japanese culture. This is partly due to the deterioration of some of the Japanese features, such as the Japanese Tea House (which is no longer standing) and the Rock Pond, but also due to the Arboretum’s limited materials to showcase the Japanese influence present all around the Arboretum.

The goals of this project were to create interpretive materials that highlight the Japanese features at Morris Arboretum, to make the story of the Morrises’ Japanese gardens available to the public, and to describe what constitutes a Japanese garden and makes them unique. As a result, I created new signage for the Hill and Water Garden and the Japanese Tea House site, a Japanese elements scavenger hunt, and an online Japanese elements self-guided tour.
SIGNAGE

Creation Process

Content

There were two important stories I wanted these new signs to tell: the history of the Morries and their Japanese gardens, and the story of Japanese gardens themselves. To find this information, I looked to the Morris Arboretum Archives and spoke with Joyce Munro, a highly involved volunteer archivist. I also spoke on numerous occasions with Hiram Munger, a horticulture volunteer who has worked extensively in the Hill and Water Garden. Additionally, I visited Shofuso, a Japanese garden located in Fairmount Park, and met with Mike Lewis, former staff member at Morris Arboretum and tour guide at Shofuso, who showed me around Shofuso and shared a plethora of information on Japanese gardens.

After going through this preliminary research phase, the next challenge was to take all the information I had learned and condense it to a limited number of words that would fit on a sign, and not be too much for a visitor to read. I started this process by highlighting the content that stood out as being most significant. I then began writing drafts, editing them, then re-writing them, until I had a version I was happy with.

Next, this text went to the Interpretation Committee. Together, we meticulously looked it over, analyzed every word, and made edits. I would then re-write the text with our edits, present the new text to the committee, and the process would begin again. It is astounding how many times six scrutinious editors can look over a piece of writing and continue to find small mistakes. A professor once told me, “to write is to re-write.” That surely held true for writing the text for these signs.

Choosing the images to be portrayed alongside the text was another process that required substantial effort. For the Japanese Tea House sign, we had a couple of great pictures from the Archives to use. The only problem we ran into was in realizing that one picture was covered in scratches that would be visible on an enlarged sign, and so we went back to the Archives to find a replacement. Luckily there was one that was virtually identical to our originally chosen picture.

For the Hill and Water garden sign, I wanted to include a Japanese painting of a landscape to reiterate the point that a Japanese garden is meant to be looked at like a painting, and that the garden is a representation of a larger, more expansive landscape. Liza Hawley, Assistant Director of Visitor Education and Youth Programming, spent time looking through art museum archives and found many beautiful paintings to choose from. I also wanted to have the Japanese characters for “hill and water garden” present on the sign. The Interpretation Committee suggested I speak with Midori Asaoka Mizukami, a past education intern who is Japanese and may be able to help. Sure enough, Midori wrote out the characters for me with a calligraphy brush, took a picture of her work, sent it to me via email, and we were able to use her writing on the sign.
Lastly, I also wanted small images on the Japanese Elements signs to make them more engaging and interesting to look at. These images were the hardest to find, because they had to be relatively simple line drawings and of high enough resolution to print clearly on a sign. I ended up finding an old Japanese book that had been digitized, conveniently filled with drawings of water, stones, and plants that I was able to use. I was particularly happy with these images because they were more meaningful than a clip art image.

*Design and Fabrication*

Anne Marie Kane from Imogen Design was the graphic designer for this project and designed all the signs. I sent her the text and images we had chosen, and she laid them out to the dimensions I gave her. We were very happy with her designs. For the two colored, aluminum signs (Hill and Water Garden and the Japanese Tea House), Anne Marie adhered to the current style the Arboretum has adopted for all its signs. While Anne Marie did produce about five different versions of each sign, each version just consisted of updates on text or picture quality.

The graphics for the two-colored aluminum signs were sent to Direct Embed. The three black and white, aluminum Japanese Elements signs were sent to Nameplate and Panel.

*Placement and Installment*

Deciding on the placement of these signs, as most of them were not replacing pre-existing signs, was a surprisingly long process. To begin, the Interpretation Committee discussed where the Japanese Tea House sign should be placed. The Tea House site is located where the Outdoor Classroom now stands, which is a somewhat hidden space that is not heavily trafficked. We could not figure out a good place where the sign would be easily visible, while also not obscuring the Outdoor Classroom. Therefore, we decided that this sign would best be placed on *Out on a Limb*, in a position that overlooks where the Tea House once stood.

For the placement of the Hill and Water Garden signs, I met first with Lucy Dinsmore, Azalea Meadow Horticulturist and section leader of this garden, and Hiram Munger, Arboretum volunteer. We placed mock signs around the garden to see where each would look best. While doing so, we had to keep in mind: 1) Was the feature the sign referenced easily visible from the location? 2) Were the signs in an appropriate location for the guided meditations? 3) Were the signs located where visitors could stop and read them (i.e. not in a tight space or area that gets too muddy)? 4) Were the signs in a place that would not obscure, hurt, or damage plants? 5) Were the signs far enough apart that the small garden would feel too cluttered?

I later went back to the Hill and Water Garden to repeat this process with Lucy Dinsmore and Tony Aiello, Director of Horticulture, to ensure that the placements we had decided on would work. During this meeting, we made a few tweaks, with the goal being that while standing at one sign, the other three would not be visible. This proved to be a difficult task, though we believe to have chosen the best spots for each sign to make this almost possible. Lucy and I will go out one more time to place flags in the locations where each sign is to go.
Once all the signs are received, Joe Mellon, Maintenance Mechanic, will mount the panels onto stanchions that we have already set aside. Then, he and his team will install the signs in the locations we have marked.

Results

Hill and Water Garden Sign

Below is the sign created to replace the previous Hill and Water Garden sign. This sign includes the history of this garden, as well as information on Japanese gardens in general. The last two sentences aim to prompt readers to look for the three smaller signs that explain the elements stone, water, and plants in the garden. As I had envisioned, this sign includes the Japanese characters for “hill and water garden” and a painting of a Japanese landscape.

Figure 1. “New Hill and Water Garden Sign.” Interpretative panel located in the Hill and Water Garden, 18” x 12.” Aluminum.

Japanese Elements Signs

The three signs below were created to share more information on Japanese gardens and what makes them unique. The aim of each sign is to invite readers to look more closely at their surroundings. Hopefully, after reading each sign, visitors will see how and why the garden was built in the way that it is and will understand the elements present throughout.
The meditations, labeled as “experience the garden through your senses,” are meant to encourage visitors to engage with the garden on a deeper level. These mindfulness activities ask visitors to slow down and spend time to truly experience both the garden and themselves in the garden. Each mindfulness activity has a theme: The Stones sign includes a grounding meditation, the Water sign includes a walking meditation, and the Plants sign includes a meditation on a plant. I hope that these exercises will also instill a sense of peace and safety in the readers, which they can take with them to other parts of the Arboretum.

Figure 2. “Japanese Elements: Stones Sign.” Interpretative panel located in the Hill and Water Garden, 10” x 8.” Metalphoto.
Water

Water is always present in a traditional Japanese garden. It may exist as running water or be expressed as an idea through the arrangement of surrounding scenery. A sunken area of land with scattered stones may represent a lake or sea with islands, while a meandering path with a bridge may mimic a stream. However it is expressed, water in Japanese gardens often symbolizes other bodies of water, either real or mythical. The presence of water can serve as a vehicle for reflection or meditation.

*Experience the garden through your senses*

Looking down at your feet, slowly walk through the garden, crossing over the mounds and bridge. As you move, bring attention to your breath. Then begin to notice three things you can hear around you.

Figure 3. “Japanese Elements: Water Sign.” Interpretative panel located in the Hill and Water Garden, 10” x 8.” Metalphoto.

In the Water sign, I have hidden a piece of information on Japanese gardens in the mindfulness activity. In a Japanese garden, the terrain is meant to dictate where an individual in the garden is to look. If the gardener wants visitors to look out ahead at a vast landscape, the terrain will be even and smooth. If the gardener wants visitors to pay attention to their immediate surroundings, the terrain will be hilly, rocky, or a bridge may be present, forcing viewers to look down at their feet and slow down (Lewis 2019).
Plants

In a traditional Japanese garden, plants are often pruned into specific shapes to mimic other parts of the natural world such as hills or mountains. Plants are chosen for their interesting textures, irregular shapes, and ability to provide year-long interest, so evergreens are commonly used. Typical plants you will find in Japanese gardens include trees, shrubs, ferns, and mosses, rather than perennials or plants with showy floral displays. Species are often symbolic. Pines, for example, can symbolize eternity.

Experience the garden through your senses
Walk through the garden and choose a plant that is particularly interesting to you. Stand in front of this plant and take five full, deep breaths. Then begin to observe the colors, textures, and shapes of your plant.

Figure 4. “Japanese Elements: Plants Sign.” Interpretative panel located in the Hill and Water Garden, 10” x 8.” Metalphoto.

Japanese Tea House Sign

Like the Hill and Water Garden sign, the Japanese Tea House sign includes information on the history of this garden feature and of the Morrises, as well as more general information on Japanese tea houses and the tea ceremony. Since this sign is to be placed on Out on a Limb in a spot that overlooks the Tea House Site, an opening sentence was required to orient the reader.
Figure 5. “The Japanese Tea House Sign.” Interpretative panel located on Out on a Limb, 30” x 12.” Aluminum.

**JAPANESE ELEMENTS SELF-GUIDED TOUR**

**Creation Process**

The credit for the content of the Japanese Elements Tour goes in large part to Larry Godley, a guide and horticulture volunteer, who created this tour for guides. I started with his text as a base, and merely made edits to condense the information, so that it would fit on an online self-guided tour, and made minor updates to the information. The pictures that are to be used will be either ones that I have taken, or ones that were taken by other Arboretum staff. I am now developing a map with text and photos that follows guidelines established for self-guided tours on the Arboretum website.

**Results**

Once complete, this tour will be available on the Morris Arboretum website. It can be found in the “Explore” tab, under “Tours.”

**JAPANESE ELEMENTS SCAVENGER HUNT**

**Creation Process**

I decided to create the Japanese Elements Scavenger Hunt to have an activity available for children on the topic of Japanese gardens. With this idea in mind, I met with Michelle Conners, Event Coordinator, who creates the Arboretum’s scavenger hunts. We agreed that a Japanese elements scavenger hunt could work as a seasonal activity, available for the month of April that includes the Cherry Blossom Days event, which currently does not have specific children’s activities.
Since Michelle has been offering these scavenger hunts for years, people have come to expect a specific format for this activity. So, I needed to follow a similar format to Michelle’s in making my own. Michelle’s scavenger hunts usually involve props (i.e. stuffed animals) that are hidden throughout the garden and have letters attached to them. There is a corresponding sheet with rhyming clues available in the Visitor Center that leads visitors to these props. Once all the props and corresponding letters are found, the “secret word” can be discovered by unscrambling the letters, and children can go back to the Visitor Center to pick up a prize.

For my prop, I decided on a laminated print-out of a Japanese cherry blossom. This would be easy for me to create in Photoshop and then to store and re-use in the future. I then chose five Japanese elements around the Arboretum where I would place these props. I wanted to reiterate the message on the Japanese Hill and Water garden signage by using stone, water, and plant, the three basic Japanese garden elements. I also decided to add the Japanese Tea House, to lead people to my newly created sign, and the Japanese Bell, because of its prominent location at the front of the Arboretum. As for the prize, I have chosen pink fans.

Once I started writing, I realized I did not just want to use this scavenger hunt to point out these elements; I wanted this activity to be more interactive. So, I decided to re-visit the theme of “experience the garden through your senses.” In each clue, I tried to add a question or invitation to touch, see, smell, or imagine. I sat at my computer for a couple hours, with a word rhymer tool up on my screen, brainstorming ways to create rhyming clues that would lead to the props, have useful information about Japanese gardens, and offer mindfulness activities.

Results

Below is a copy of the Japanese Elements Scavenger Hunt clues that will be available in the Visitor Center. In places where I couldn’t figure a way to add an interactive activity within the rhyme, I added an addendum in italics. Once all the letters have been found, they can be unscrambled to spell out “Mr. Muto.”

Unfortunately, due to the unforeseen closure of the Arboretum in response to the coronavirus outbreak, the Cherry Blossom Days event will be canceled this year. It is also unlikely that the Arboretum will reopen in April, so the Japanese Elements Scavenger Hunt will not be available this year. My hope is that this scavenger hunt can be offered next April, instead.
JAPANESE ELEMENTS SCAVENGER HUNT

Follow the clues to find the cherry blossom flowers. Write down the letter you find on each flower next to the corresponding clue to crack the code!

The Japanese Bell is where you are first bound,
Tap it with your hand
Can you hear a sound?

Out on a Limb is your next place of landing,
You’re looking for a Japanese tea house
Though you won’t find it standing!
Once you’re there, check every sign
You may just discover what you’re trying to find!
What do you think you could have found inside
the Tea House if it were still here?

Now head to the Orange Balustrade
and turn on your ears
Do you hear that?
A waterfall is near!

You’re making great progress,
Head into English Park next,
You’re looking for a standing stone,
Which is sure to impress.
What does the stone feel like when you touch it
with your hand?

Your last stop is Oak Allee
Where waiting for you will be,
A big, beautiful, flowering Japanese cherry tree!
Take a deep breath in and enjoy the smell,
You’ve completed the scavenger hunt!
Great job for doing so well!

Who was the Morris’s Japanese gardener?

___  ___  ___  ___  ___  ___
   1  3  1  4  2  5

Figure 6. “Japanese Elements Scavenger Hunt Clues.”
CONCLUSION

After lots of hard work, I am excited to see my final products up and in action in the Arboretum. I am interested to see how visitors will interact with these new interpretive materials on Japanese gardens at Morris Arboretum, and hope that changes will be made to the materials in the future in response to people’s use of them. I also hope that individuals who come across these new signs, the Japanese Elements Self-Guided Tour, or Japanese Elements Scavenger Hunt, will leave the Arboretum with a new sense of curiosity and intrigue for Japanese gardens, maybe similar to that intrigue that John and Lydia Morris had years ago.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following individuals, who were each a huge help in helping me with this project:

The Arboretum Interpretation Committee, consisting of Jeff Clark, Robert Gutowski, Liza Hawley, Jan McFarlan, and Bryan Thompson-Nowak, who helped with editing all material I produced, to ensure that everything was absolutely perfect, and with bringing this project into fruition.

Lucy Dinsmore, Azalea Meadow Horticulturist, and Hiram Munger, Arboretum horticulture volunteer and “keeper of the Hill and Water Garden,” who helped me in brainstorming the content for the Hill and Water Garden signs and where to place them.

Larry Godley, Morris Arboretum education volunteer, who put in lots of work into creating the original Japanese Elements Tour, which acted as a base for the self-guided tour.

Anne Marie Kane, with Imogen Design, who did the graphic design for the signs, and made every revision we asked for quickly and beautifully!

Mike Lewis, Morris Arboretum and Shofuso staff member, who took me on a tour of Shofuso and shared lots of valuable information about Japanese gardens.

Joyce Munro, Morris Arboretum archivist volunteer, who shared with me lots of information and answered all my questions.

Michelle Conners, Events Coordinator, who played an integral part in the creation of the Japanese Elements Scavenger Hunt.

Midori Asaoka Mizukami, a previous Morris Arboretum Education Intern, who provided the calligraphy on the Hill and Water Garden sign

Joe Mellon and the facilities staff, who will but putting up all my new signs!