

Selecting stone for Japanese style gardens by Howard Healey

When it comes to the use of stone in Japanese garden design, Howard Healey, owner of the Japanese Garden Centre, is one of the most experienced in the UK having sourced and placed stone for over 25 years. He recently presented on the subject at The Japanese Garden Society's Annual Conference in Cardiff.

The use of stone in Japanese gardens

Japanese style gardens are all about subtly recreating natural landscapes in a garden environment. Along



Figure 1: Dry River made from Blue Grey Granite (Barnet, North London). These dry river stones were chosen to represent a mountain range with water emerging from high up in the mountain. I found a stone with a quartz face that I placed in the base to represent the fast flow and foaming of the river.

with water and plants, the placement of stone is a core element of the style. It is a way to symbolise mountains, hills and other geographical forms. And is a natural link to what you see in the wild, particularly when used near and in water and alongside plants.

Almost every garden we design and build uses rock in some way. But the type and use of the rock varies dramatically depending on the application. Whether it's natural or handcrafted stone, we like to use bold stone elements for visual impact and to provide structure. Each rock is chosen specifically based on its unique qualities and to fit with the garden or space we're using it in. We carefully consider how the stone will complement plants, other rocks and how it will sit in the overall design of the garden.

When we talk about selecting stones for Japanese gardens, most people will immediately think of the dry stone gardens in Japan. Two excellent examples of these are Ryoan-ji and the more modern looking Jisso-in, both in Kyoto. However, there is much more to the use of



Figure 2: Cascading waterfall in private garden (Halling, Kent). We use Blue Grey Granite to create waterfalls, many in private gardens. It looks the most natural with lovely colour range, which becomes more intense when it's wet.

stone in the Japanese gardens. Whether it is in building streams, ponds or detailing to edge a planting bed. Each stone is deliberately selected and positioned. These little details are often overlooked, but taking the extra time to use the right rocks really does make a difference.

Over the time we've been in business it's become more challenging to source the right stone. In particular, there are limitations on sourcing British natural rock such as Paddlestones and Gneiss and quarried stones such as Welsh slate. This means we have to be more conscious of what we source and actively work with our suppliers to ensure we have a supply of the rarer stones and to source really great quality alternatives such as Chinese limestone, Turkish stone and granite Palisades. In the future we'll be using more hand carved feature stones rather than naturally found ones.

The different types of stone

We use a large variety of stone, sourced from the UK and further afield in our gardens. The different types of stone – from purple and Welsh slate to Gneiss and blue grey



Figure 3: Stepping stones across water (Loughton, Essex). I look out for and keep stones of certain thicknesses, for example, flat stepping stones. We often use deep, flat stones to go up banks or flatter pieces to form a way across the pond.

granite - suit specific spaces, thanks to their features, texture, shape and size. A decision on what stone to use is primarily based on what we want to create in the design, but we also consider factors such as availability of the materials, handling and cost.

Blue grey granite

Blue grey granite is the stone that we use most frequently for projects and the most popular stone we sell through our Japanese Garden Centre. We use it for a whole range of things including feature standing stones, stepping stones and spill stones as the shapes available and colour variation within the stone creates more interest than other quarried stones.

We have had great access to our UK quarry for the last 23 years, allowing us to personally select the rock based on shapes, sizes and colours for specific projects. Access to the quarry is now more restricted than it used to be, but we tend to stock c. 60 tonnes of this stone - everything from tiny pieces up to specimen stones weighing several tonnes. As we have hand-picked the



Figure 4: Turtle made from Blue Grey Granite (The Japanese Garden Centre, Kent).

As a bit of fun, we select pieces to form turtles, which symbolise longevity and wisdom in Japan. Finding the body is the most difficult part!

stones over several years, we have some stand out pieces - some have been waiting 10 years to be put in the right garden. (Figures 1-4)

Gneiss boulders

Often used as feature standing stones, to represent mountains protruding from the sea. The colour and texture of these naturally rounded stones, often with strong black and white striations, make each piece unique.



Figure 5: A stone grouping using Gneiss Boulders (Sevenoaks, Kent).

When we started out 25 years ago, we had a readily available source of Gneiss boulders. However, over the years these have been increasingly harder to find, which is a real shame. An alternative to Gneiss is rounded glacial boulders. These are naturally found in Scotland and Wales, and while they are slightly less exciting to look at, they have brilliant shapes. (Figure 5)

Welsh slate

Welsh slate can be used for standing stones, but we tend to use this stone more frequently for dry rivers, feature walls and spill stones.

We used to source natural Paddlestones, from Oban in Scotland, but due to conservation this practice came to an end. Now we use crushed Welsh slate which is tumbled in old ready-mix concrete lorries to create 'water worked' paddlestones. The quality of these is becoming better and better. We use them to create drain detail and around buildings - as seen in Japanese temples. (Figures 6, 7)



Figure 6: Dry stone feature wall at a private Japanese Garden. (Sevenoaks, Kent).

Rocks.....continued

Welsh farm stones

Welsh farm stones can have some really good quality veins and texture. As they are exposed to the weather they often have moss and lichen growing on the surface, which you don't get with quarried stone. It means they can look old and established straight away. To select these stones, we have to visit the source and pick them out – this is time consuming and, as it's less readily available than quarried stone, it's rare to get hold of really nice feature stones. (Figure 8)



Figure 7: Welsh slate paddle stones adjacent to house, (Stoke on Trent).

York stone

We tend to use York stone for pathways, with interlocking pieces of stone creating a great visual effect and drawing the eye along the path. These paths tend to meander through the garden with soft curves, giving us space to plant on either side. It is extremely time consuming to create these paths as pieces of stone are carefully selected to fit the pattern. Where we can't find the right piece we will cut the stone to the right shape. Nothing is left to chance, as we need the grouting gaps to be a uniform width. (Figure 9)



Figure 8: Japanese Garden at RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, for which we won a Gold Medal.

Kentish ragstone

We mainly use Kentish ragstone for feature stones. We tend to source stone that has been dug from stone outcrops, rather than broken by blasting in a quarry. We find that the shape of the individual pieces is better and the texture more natural. The surface is generally porous, which means moss can easily establish itself on the stone's surface. (Figures 10, 11)



Figure 9: York stone path leading up to an Oak gateway, Henley-on-Thames.



Figure 10: Mr Ishihara's gold award winning artisan gardens, Chelsea Flower Show, 2012-18. He has been using our stone for the past 6 years, we keep his favourite pieces in the shade to help the moss grow.

Zimbabwean stone

I was born and raised in Harare, before moving to the UK. Driving around Zimbabwe you see huge boulders and rocks naturally occurring – they're truly phenomenal. 25 years ago we collected a stock of Zimbabwean rock from a chrome mining cooperative, which we brought back to the UK. It has beautiful red and brown earthy colours and is really well weathered and textured. The small pieces look like mountains and we have lots of pieces with really dramatic shapes. These pieces are perfect for indoor



Figure 11: Kentish ragstone water basin at Kimchee restaurant, London. I found this piece of stone in our rock pile around 10 years ago and immediately thought of it as a natural water basin. The owner of the restaurant prefers natural looking elements, so it was the perfect spot for it – it looks like it's always been there.

gardens, and I love using a piece of my homeland in our projects. (Figure 12)

Chinese Stone

In a recent visit to China, I chose some tall slender limestone pieces, carved from large blocks, for use as standing stones. They are ideal for our customers who want to build a standing stone arrangement in their garden. They are easy to transport and very manageable to arrange yourself, without the need for heavy lifting equipment. We've also recently seen some lovely crafted



Figure 12: Zimbabwean Rock at Waters Corporation HQ, Wilmslow. This garden concept was 'sea and land'. We chose the rock for its dramatic shape.

stones with intense natural colours from one of our other Chinese suppliers. These stones will really lend themselves to contemporary gardens (Figure 13)

Hopefully my passion for Japanese gardens has been conveyed in this article, and in particular the importance of selecting and placing the right rocks with care. Our Japanese Garden Centre in Kent is open 7 days a week from 10am to 4pm, and it is our mission to pass on our knowledge and love of Japanese gardens, so we'd love to see you!!

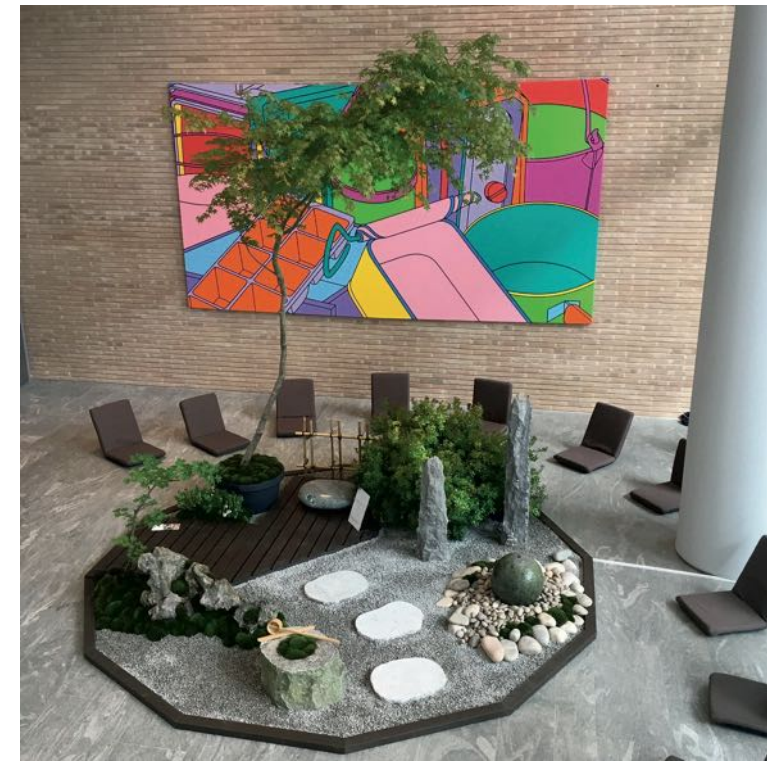


Figure 13: Limestone standing stones, Shard London. We used Chinese Limestone to create this formation to represent the height of London's tallest building for a wellness garden in the reception. The colour contrasts nicely with the moss and planting too.