

The making of a Japanese-style garden at Beck Farm Part 5

by Andy Bolton

Gravel, Crane & Turtle islands

From the very start of my project creating a Japanese style garden, it was always my intention to have an area of gravel with a turtle island which would be viewable from the back of the house when sitting on the terrace. This would provide an element of 'Ma' (space or void) against which the other elements of the garden can be viewed.

JGS members will be very familiar with the use of gravel in Japanese style gardens most often seen in Buddhist temples known as Karesansui or dry landscape gardens. The most famous example of which is Ryoan-ji in Kyoto

which many of us including myself have had the privilege of visiting. The gravel in these gardens is representative of a sea or ocean and therefore has to be flat!

My own garden therefore provided somewhat of a challenge as it is on a gentle slope and required some not insubstantial earth moving to establish a flat area for the gravel. Having firstly outlined the area, I used pegs and a long spirit level to



Figure 1: Area for gravel with turf removed and temporary placement of stones.

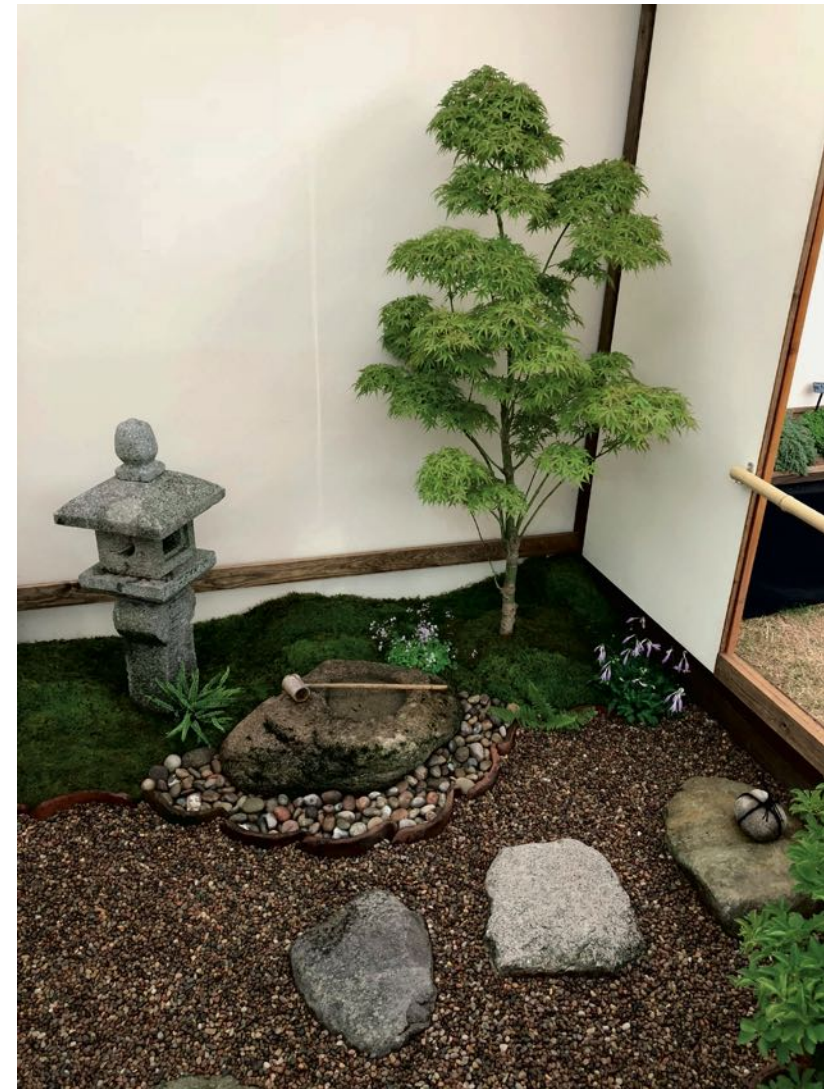


Figure 2: JGS show garden at Tatton 2018.

establish where I had to dig out and used a crude 'cut and fill' method to even out the ground. Basically, the earth taken from the high end was used to build up the low area. A point to take into consideration at this stage was the final depth of the gravel as this determines how much soil to dig out. As I wanted to have the option of being able to rake the gravel, I made the final depth 75mm (three inches) although sometimes it's recommended to have at least 150mm to allow for deep patterns. Figure 1 shows the area marked out having



Figure 3: Edging of double clay pantiles in progress.

removed the turf but prior to digging out. It also shows the temporary placement of the stones for both the turtle island and crane arrangement. All the stones were once again from a generous local farmer and matched the other stone in the garden.

Having levelled the area, the next question was how to establish an edging, so that the gravel is separated from the mounded earth to stop it mixing and becoming dirty over time. As you can see from the following photographs, I did this in three ways; namely, rocks, clay pantiles set vertically and a low edging mound of mortar.

Part of the edging is a continuation of the path from the terrace using stone slabs from the top of a well we found in the garden when renovating the house (also shown in Fig.1). This is an example of 'Mitate-mono' or 'rediscovered thing', common in Japanese gardens and a nice reference to the past.



Figure 4: Mortar fillet with template.

The edging made from rocks looks simple to do but takes an inordinate amount of time to choose, find the best face and then dig or mortar in place to get a pleasing effect. It's important not to be too regular with height, orientation, etc. to establish an informal or naturalistic look.

The reused clay pantiles were the same type I used for the roofed wall and to fill the gabions see *Shakkei* Volume 24 No.1. I still have many left and was happy to donate some to the JGS team from the NW who built the most recent display garden for the RHS Tatton Show which achieved a Silver Gilt medal. See Figure 2; we all felt it should have won gold! Figure 3 shows my own tile edging being constructed, two tiles in thickness and mortared into place. This again was difficult and took longer than it looks, getting the tiles the same height, vertical in both directions etc., etc. However, I'm pleased with the final result which

matches well with the other materials in the garden.

The third edging type was made from mortar in a shallow triangular section around the turtle island. This was formed using a simple template to achieve the correct height of 75mm and was laid directly on top of the geotextile weed-proof membrane. See Figure 4. Many thanks go to Steve Wright (*Ichini*) for his helpful advice, but he didn't warn me about the effects of many hours kneeling. I ended up with 'Clergyman's knee' - infrapatellar bursitis - not due to excessive praying though!

With the edging now complete, I had to decide on the type of gravel to use. My thoughts had to include both the size

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and colour of gravel, aesthetics, price and ease of maintenance. Most gravel used in Japanese gardens especially Kyoto, is silver/grey in colour with a size of 6-12mm. This type of gravel has sharp edges, so it holds well in place when raked into patterns. A similar gravel in this country can cost over £150 per tonne or bulk bag and often transport costs are not included. I worked out I needed about 3 tonnes so went hunting in the local builders' merchants to consider alternatives. My local firm had a gravel of 10mm, nice mixed colours that matched the stone in the garden and was only £35/tonne including delivery. Not authentic, but local, cheap and 'fits'. As mentioned before, I put geotextile membrane over the bare earth prior to laying the gravel to prevent weeds from coming through and prevent soil mixing with the gravel. I used a 90g/m² non-woven membrane bought off eBay. I have used this before as it seems to last well, and I don't end up with threads of black plastic in the soil which can be a problem with the woven type as it frays when cutting to shape. I then



Figure 5: Turtle island planted with Thyme.

used blocks of wood 75mm thickness and a spirit level to ensure the depth of the gravel was even over the whole area.

I had previously moved a Niwaki style *Pinus sylvestris* (Scots pine) I had been cultivating next to the turtle and then the surrounding area was planted up with *Thymus serpyllum* var. *albus* which I bought as plug plants and then potted up and grew on. This area gets quite a bit of sun so hopefully they will thrive and so far, the results are pleasing in replicating moss. Let's see



Figure 6: Completed gravel area with Turtle, Crane and ship.

what the winter weather does for them. Figure 5 shows the Turtle island with the mortar edging and Thyme planting.

Surrounding the gravel area, I have used *Sagina subulata* (Irish moss) in shadier spots, more *Thymus serpyllum* var. *albus* and also a small area between stepping stones of *Scleranthus biflorus*. This is I feel the best moss 'look alike' for a sunny spot but quite expensive to buy at £4 for a tiny plant. However, I've found since planting, it spreads quite rapidly so lifting

and dividing may be possible to cover larger areas.

Figure 6 shows the completed area with a new stepping stone path leading to the staggered stone bridge made from reclaimed curb stones. Turtle, Crane and a stone representing a ship.

Next time I will hopefully have completed a dry stream, further gravel area, and a pond. The end is in sight!