

The armchair enthusiast's reading list – resources for the cold, dark days of winter by John Abson

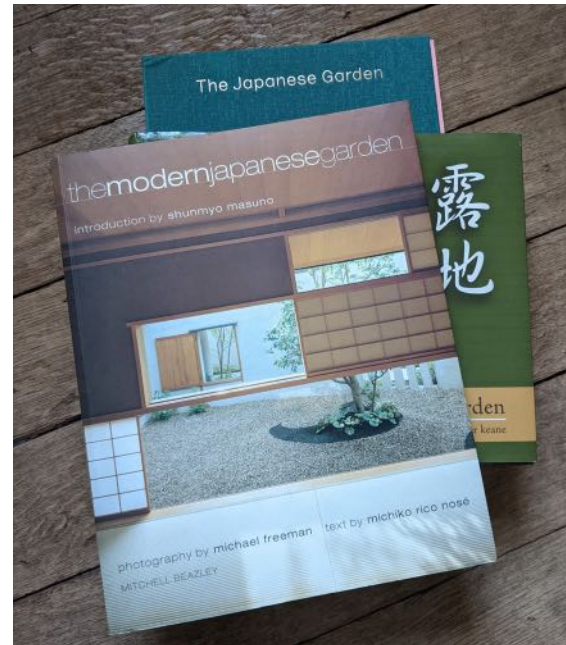
Now that the nights have drawn in and the garden is less demanding in terms of maintenance time, many JGS members may feel the need to snuggle up under the *kotatsu* (heated coffee table) with a mug of tea and a book about levering large rocks into holes in the ground.

With hundreds, if not thousands of books having been published on the subject of the Japanese garden, it is sometimes difficult to know where to begin, especially for those new to the subject. With this in mind, I have rummaged through the bookshelves in an attempt to pull together a shortlist of books that address different aspects of the Japanese garden, and which should be sufficient to get you through to the first cherry blossom of the spring.

One of the positives of the wide range of literature is that there is something for everyone. So whether you want to know the difference between the *Kamakura* and *Muromachi* period gardens, or you are fretting about the right time of year to de-needle your pines, there is a book for you.

The Historical Approach

Most books about Japanese gardens will give you an idea, at least in the opening chapter, of how Japanese gardens originated, and then evolved over time. **Günter Nitschke's** *Japanese Gardens* puts the social, historical and cultural elements of the gardens front and centre of the book. Widely considered to be one of the authoritative books about Japanese gardens published in the last century, it is exceptionally well-researched and packed full of factual information. The author is an architect, and to a certain extent this is evident in his writing. Much is made of prevailing religious, economic and social trends, and the impact that they had on Japanese gardens and architecture of the respective periods. However, the use of plant



material is almost entirely excluded from the book, which is perhaps an unusual approach to the topic of gardens.

This book is certainly worth having in a collection, as it is almost encyclopaedic in terms of background knowledge. That being said, it is somewhat of a dry and academic read, and the photographs (at least in my 1999 edition) do not have the brightness and appeal of more recent works.

Typical quote: “The orthodox Confucian ethic supported by the Tokugawa shoguns clearly suited their political interests. It demanded unquestioning acceptance of existing class relationships and thus provided the ideological foundation for a rigid social hierarchy.”

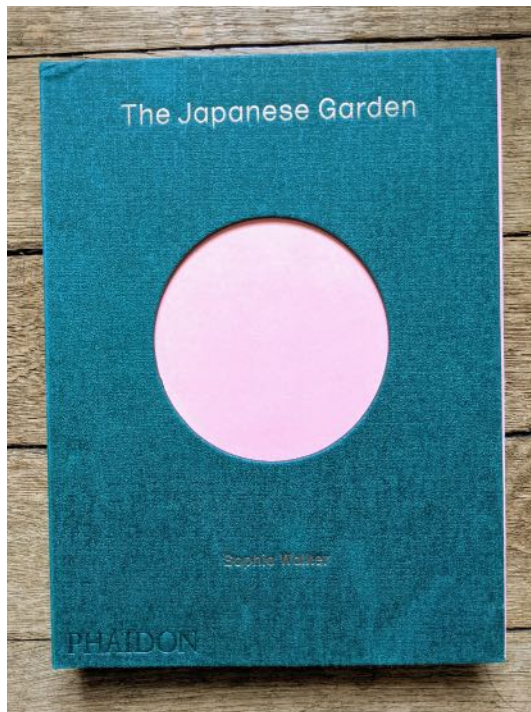
Do buy: If you like history, sociology, religious studies or compartmentalizing.

Don't buy: If you are wondering “What was that beautiful autumn foliage shrub that I saw in Kenrokuen last November?”

The Philosopher's Path

From the beginning, **Sophie Walker's** *The Japanese Garden* is a beautiful book. The dark green hardback cover is cut out in a perfect circle to reveal the cherry blossom pink interior cover beneath. The paper is thick and high quality, with a matte finish. Nearly every page contains at least one beautiful photograph or illustration. This is a book to keep on the coffee table and impress your guests. The majority of the contents are brief descriptions of gardens, temples and shrines around Japan, albeit with a primary focus on Kyōto. The large number of gardens contained within the book and the accompanying photographs may make it useful for anyone who is planning a garden tour of Japan, and who would like to decide which gardens to visit.

In terms of the approach that the author has taken, the book is perhaps slightly less historically focused than Nitschke, but preoccupied more with an artistic and religious interpretation of Japanese gardens. This is reflected in the seven essays by writers, philosophers and artists that are contained within the books, as well as Walker's own musings which have titles such as “The Way, Body and Mind” or “Duality and Reflection”. In contrast to Nitschke, and happily for those of us who think that plants are an important element of the garden, the author is also kind enough to provide an index of “Plants of Japan”. Impressively, these are listed by their botanical names, English common names and Japanese names in both *kanji* and *romaji*. She even includes nine different mosses for all you bryologists out there.



Typical quote: “The garden provides an opportunity to negotiate our own selfless position in relation to form, space and plane in order to establish a sense of oneness.”

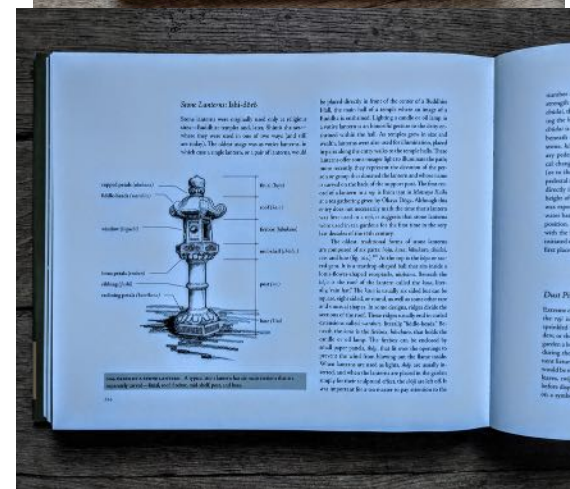
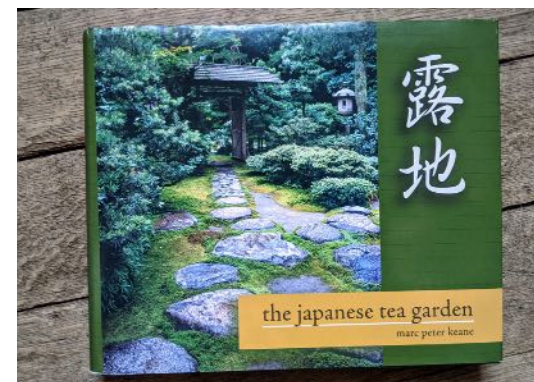
Do buy: If, as you fall over in the woods, you ponder the impenetrable Zen koan: “Can anyone hear the sound of my one hand flapping?”

Don't buy: If you are looking for advice on how to tie the knots on your *yotsumegaki* bamboo fence.

Tea for two

For those wanting to explore the *roji*, or dewy path that leads through the verdant, mossy garden to the tea hut, there can be few books more exhaustively researched than Marc Peter Keane's **The Japanese Tea Garden**. Beautifully photographed and illustrated, this book traces the evolution of tea gardens from their origins in China, through the gardens of the great tea masters such as Sen no Rikyū, to their incorporation into great estates such as Katsura Rikyū. Along the way, the author shows how Zen Buddhism, the tea ceremony and the gardens themselves became entwined with the prevailing cultures of the time, and how the tastes and fashions of those involved came to be reflected in the choice of lanterns, planting and architecture of the tea garden.

Although this makes for a highly detailed reference book which can be a challenging read at times, it can also be picked up and opened at various points for guidance on how to lay out a *tsukubai* (water basin arrangement), for example, or the types of fences that are appropriate for this type of garden. The photographs are also a useful reference point, offering images of a very different Japanese garden to the common perceptions of dry rock and gravel, or masses of shimmering cherry blossom.



Typical Quote: “Along with the changes in planting style, path design and the (possible) development of a new style of lantern, the overall nature of the *roji* also began to change under Oribe's influence”.

Do buy: If your interest in Japanese gardens tends towards the lush, green and mossy.

Don't buy: If you prefer coffee



The armchair enthusiast's reading list... continued

Zenzen

Spoiler alert: *Shots in the Dark*, by Shōji Yamada is not entirely a book about Japanese gardens. To be precise, half of it is a book about one specific Japanese garden, the famous *karesansui* or dry rock and gravel garden at the temple of Ryōanji. The other half of the book is about Japanese archery. What these two things have in common, according to Yamada, is that they have both been misinterpreted by the West, in the name of Zen Buddhism. The first half of the book is largely concerned with *Zen in the art of archery* by Eugen Herrigel. This book has become famous worldwide and inspired many other “*Zen and the art of...*” books and articles. As a scholar of Buddhism and of archery, Yamada asks some searching questions of the accounts contained in Herrigel’s work and comes to some interesting conclusions that pave the way for the section on Ryōanji. Here he finds himself again challenging the perceived wisdom about the site, and questions whether it is actually attractive to look at, and how and why it came to be linked to Zen.

The author is a professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, and the writing certainly reflects his academic status, with extensive research supporting his findings. It is not a coffee table book, with large glossy photographs, but rather a small paperback, densely packed with text. And yet, for such a scholarly book, it is an entertaining read. For anyone interested in the *karesansui* style in general, or Ryōanji in particular, it opens up a whole new way of looking at the gardens.

Typical quote: “Leaving aside the opinions of advocates like Ōyama, whose love for Ryōanji knows no bounds, there is some eye-opening testimony from a local gardener named Okuda Masatomo,

who is familiar with the rock garden as it was in the past. According to Okuda, the ground under the rock garden is full of stumps”.

Do buy: If you enjoy having the things you thought you knew turned upside-down.

Don’t buy: If you have one of those miniature Zen gardens in a tray on your desk.

Garden Trees

Niwaki, by Jake Hobson is different from the majority of other books in this list in that it is less about Japanese gardens, and more about Japanese gardening. Surprisingly, prior to its publication, this was quite a sizable gap in the literature. Much has been written about Japanese gardens, but very little about how they are maintained and the gardeners who maintain them.

Discussion of plants and how they are used in the Japanese garden seems to be strangely missing from the majority of books on the subject, which is odd when you consider how vital they are to the distinct appearance of so many Japanese gardens. The specific focus of *Niwaki* is on the pruning of trees and shrubs, so don’t expect a great deal of information on rock placement, bamboo fences or raked gravel. However, you will not find a better resource if you want to know how to go about clipping your *karikomi* (topiary shrubs) pinching out the buds on your pine trees (*midoritsumi*) or creating a *daisugi* style Japanese cedar.

Compared to some of the more academically oriented books listed here, *Niwaki* is an engaging and easy read, with clear “how to” instructions and illustrations, combined with the author’s thoughts, observations, and experiences of gardens in Japan. In addition to giving Japanese and botanical names for plants, he also suggests substitutes

that may be more easily obtained in the UK. If you own or are responsible for maintaining any type of Japanese garden, other than perhaps one in the dry *karesansui*, or mossy tea garden style, then this book is almost indispensable as a reference work for pruning techniques.

Typical quote: “Tea houses, lanterns and pond layouts are all well and good, but you should not for one minute think that they make an authentic Japanese garden. My gripe? I wish the gardeners would prune the trees.”

Do buy: If you want to make your pine trees look a little bit more like the ones in Japan.

Don’t buy: If you still can’t get the pine resin out of your hair from your last pruning attempts.

The Modernist

Whereas books about Japanese gardens typically tend to focus on the better-known historical ones, *The Modern Japanese Garden* by Michiko Rico Nosé, as the title suggests, takes a different approach. Each chapter of the book highlights a number of gardens by modern Japanese garden designers, and shows how they have taken traditional materials and techniques, or approaches to space and light, and incorporated them in a modern design. In one example, a traditional bamboo water spout protrudes through a concrete panel wall, feeding a small square pond surrounded by the dwarf mondo grass *Ophiopogon japonicus* ‘Nana’. In another, a single dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) is planted inside the ground floor of a small Tokyo house and rises up through the ceiling so that its flowering canopy is at face height on the first floor, surrounded by white, expanded-steel mesh. The featured designs are accompanied by explanations of the designer’s intentions and bright, crisp photography which brings the subjects to life. The overall feel of the



book is one of light and airiness, which sits well with the modern designs that are its focus.

If most literature about Japanese gardens tends to give the impression that modernity was born and died with the designer Mirei Shigemori, then *The Modern Japanese Garden* will give you cause to think again. The gardens contained within its pages demonstrate just how well the fundamentals of Japanese garden design can be adapted to contemporary settings, both urban and rural.

Typical quote: “To many gardeners in the West, the traditional Japanese preference for simplicity and reduction sounds admirable in principle, but when faced with the practicalities of doing without these plants or those, few decide to carry it through.”

Do buy: If you want to see Japanese garden design principles being applied in a contemporary context.

Don't buy: If you consider Edo period gardens to be modern, vulgar and distasteful.

The all-rounder

Perhaps you don't need an academic treatise on the garden history of Japan, but you would like some background on the subject. You understand that Zen Buddhism had an influence on the arts and culture of Japan, but do not see its expression in the placement of every individual stone. Maybe you are wondering how to tie that bamboo fence or looking for a directory of plants used in the Japanese garden.

The good news is that you don't need to buy every specialist book on each different element of the Japanese garden. *Authentic Japanese Gardens: Creating Japanese Design and Detail in the Western Garden* by Yoko Kawaguchi takes a very practical approach to its subject matter. Although you will find more detailed information on pruning in *Niwaki* and a more in-depth approach to the tea garden written by Marc Keane, this book does a very good job of bringing together many different aspects of the Japanese garden and presenting them in sufficient detail that the reader feels capable of implementing them in their own garden.

More plant focused than many other books, it still has enough practical hard landscaping information to suggest the depths of hardcore and mortar that might be needed for various projects.

Alongside photographs of traditional Japanese gardens, there are also images of Japanese influenced gardens that have been created in the West, demonstrating how similar effects can be achieved, despite using a different plant palette, or combining the two approaches.

Typical quote: “In Japan, 50cm (1 ft 8 in) is the usual distance allowed between the centre of one stepping stone and the next”.

Do buy: If you are planning a new Japanese garden, or part of one, and are looking for some practical information to get you started.

Don't buy: If you are looking for 300 pages on a specialist aspect of Japanese gardens, such as the cultivation of moss or the history of the *karesansui* style garden.

In conclusion

Whether you are just dipping your toe in the waters of Japanese gardens, or are fully submerged up to the eyebrows, there is always something new to read and something new to learn. I have barely scratched the surface of the literature that is available on the subject and there are many other authors and books out there that are equally deserving of a place on anyone's reading list. The important thing with any interest is, I think, to keep surprising yourself with new and fresh ideas. And the best place for that, in the middle of winter, is tucked up in your favourite armchair with a new book.

Book list

Hobson, J., (2007) *Niwaki: pruning, training and shaping trees the Japanese way*. Portland: Timber Press.

Kawaguchi, Y., (2016) *Authentic Japanese Gardens: Creating Japanese Design and Detail in the Western Garden*. East Petersburg: Fox Chapel Publishing.

Keane, M. P., (2009) *The Japanese Tea Garden*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press.

Nitschke, G., (1999) *Japanese gardens: right angle and natural form* Köln: Taschen.

Nosé, M. R. (2002) *The Modern Japanese Garden*. London: Octopus Publishing.

Walker, S., (2017) *The Japanese Garden*. London; New York: Phaidon.

Yamada, S., (2009) *Shots in the Dark: Japan, Zen, and the West*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.