

Japanese House Gardens

by David Burgess

After giving talks on various aspects of Japanese gardens, I am frequently asked two questions – what is my garden like? and what are the typical house gardens of the Japanese like? Our garden is not Japanese, although it has many of the characteristics of one. The answer to the latter question lies in the fact that many Japanese live in apartments with maybe a window box or even a tub outside the door, so I made a point in recent travels to observe and report on the typical front garden without being too intrusive. Most of the gardens illustrated are in Takayama due to its smaller size and more rural nature.



Takayama - small city garden

Many of the urban house gardens were enclosed often with solid walls or Photinia hedges and despite their relative small size almost invariably contained a pine tree, often reaching the eaves of the house. Typically they would have a bamboo, lantern and water basin together with the bike and children's toys. The small urban garden shows a collection of substantial trees dwarfing the building together with flower shrubs of azaleas and rhododendrons.

In a more rural setting the gardens were often larger with a wider variety of shrubs and trees. In the image taken from the train en route to Takayama at high speed over the wall photography was not an option. The shakkei here included rice and vegetable fields set against a backdrop of the rivers and mountains. A second image shows a similar garden with a colourful (azaleas) cultivated riverside garden below the property.

A number of houses on the periphery of towns adjacent to the hillside had vegetable gardens. The image here shows a well tended mixed vegetable plot with flowering rockery to the front.



En route to Takayama - rural garden

Small gardens are to be found outside many shops and commercial properties even if limited to just a single tub or flower pot. The one shown was adjacent to a small shop and particularly colourful rather contra to the usual shades of green with focus on textures and forms. A wonderful wisteria in full bloom was to be found outside a sake brewery and shop in the old Sannomachi district of Takayama.

The final garden is one of my favourites and is the front garden of a tea house, selling and offering the tea ceremony. The tea house was close to Manpuku-ji temple near Uji. The photo was taken from the entrance bridge showing a lovely ravine garden with plenty of colour and contrast. One just wonders what the tea garden itself was like.

Apart from the smaller size and fewer of them, house gardens in Japan showed meticulous attention to detail in the pruning and training of the trees and shrubs and contrary to the common misconception contained flowering plants.



Takayama - city garden on the bank of the river



TOP: Takayama - shop garden

BOTTOM: Takayama - vegetable garden on outskirts of town



Manpukoji - villa garden