

Why You Should Go to Japan: The Benefit of Practical Work Placements in Japan for Horticulturists

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Introduction

No country in the world can match the scale and consistency of Japan's horticultural heritage, with a continuous gardening legacy stretching back further than 700AD¹. The landscape design, maintenance style and horticultural ethos have evolved over many centuries- often in complete global isolation- and are very different to that of the West.

So what is there for a western horticulturist to learn? And what if you don't want to work in a Japanese garden? Regardless of your background, there are a huge range of opportunities for development. You can hone your practical skills by experiencing techniques not commonly practiced in the West, such as specific methods for pruning, management of gravel, water and moss and hard landscaping². You can learn new plants and see how Japanese species grown in western gardens are cared for in their native environment.

In terms of planting and landscape design, Japanese gardens prioritize simplicity, harmony, movement and light: principles which are not well understood in western gardens. Spatial arrangement of rocks and plants is highly advanced and can teach a great deal to the western designer.

Finally, the Japanese horticultural profession has a very different conception of the ethos of gardening, with a deep connection to nature and an emphasis on spirit-of-place sensitive management.³



Case Study

I am a gardener from the UK, where I work for the National Trust at Bodnant Garden, North Wales.

In September 2015 I started a sabbatical on the **Triad Fellowship**, which allowed me to spend four months working at the largest conservatory garden in Japan, **Kiseki no Hoshi no Shokobutskan**. I also completed short work placements with **bonsai master Mastusue-sensei**, at the traditional garden **Sorakuen** in Kobe, and with renowned gardening company **Ueyakato Zoen** in Kyoto.

This experience has given me innumerable benefits for my work and my future career. These include:

- Skills in planting and landscape design
- New techniques for use and care of Japanese native plants
- Improved plant knowledge, pruning skills and other horticultural skills
- Experience of innovative modern display horticulture techniques and creation of exhibition gardens
- New ideas to revitalize and improve my home institution, Bodnant Garden
- An increased work ethic and passion for horticulture



Ikebana at Ikenobo, Kyoto



Karesansui raking at Nanzen-ji with Ueyakato Zoen



Pine pruning at Sorakuen, Kobe



Modern display horticulture at Kiseki no Hoshi: my creations



Experiences of Other Horticulturists

I contacted members of the North American Japanese Garden Association to gather stories and experiences of others who had worked or studied in Japan. These are a few of the responses.

"The standard of maintenance, the skill levels of the workers, and the craftsmanship of their work is at a higher level than anywhere that I have ever seen. Anyone, in any field, can benefit from spending time there. Working in Japan was by far the hardest I have ever physically worked in my life, but it was an invaluable experience for me as a Pruner, Gardener, and simply as a craftsman. I believe it all goes back to the saying: 'In Japan, everything is aesthetic.'"

Greg Kitajima, Aesthetic Pruner,

NAJGA Member

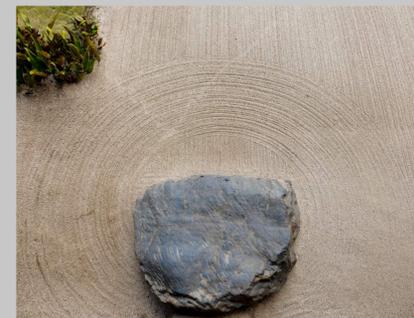


"The treatment of plants in Japanese gardens is fundamentally different from European and American treatments, and for the attentive professional even a brief period of study can reveal new possibilities for creating rich and diverse spatial experience using shrubs, understory trees, and canopy trees."

Mark Bourne
Windsmith Design

"I decided to train in Japan because just as a chef who wants to become a master of classical French cooking studies with a French master chef, I wanted to gain knowledge and experience directly from the source."

Avram Dalton, JDA Suirakuen
NAJGA Member



"As far as helping my career in horticulture, going to Japan was a must. What I came to realize is that there are hundreds of years of knowledge, experience and traditions handed down through these gardens and to be a part of that lineage sounded intriguing to me. Having first hand exposure to a Japanese gardener's level of dedication to their art form left a lasting impression on me. It is a quality which I work towards every day and I wouldn't have fully appreciated without visiting Japan.

It was also a tremendous boost for my resume. In my opinion, if you want to be a professional Japanese gardener at a public garden, it is essential you at least visit Japan and take in gardens and their culture."

Nick Esthus, Memphis Botanic Gardens
NAJGA Member

How to get to Japan (Or where to start)

Personal connections are very important in Japanese culture, so the best way to find a placement is through an introduction. Don't worry, that's not as hard as it sounds. For starters, you could...

- Join the North American Japanese Garden Association
- Make contact with local Japanese gardeners or gardens
- Help out at your nearest Japanese garden

Additionally, The **Triad Fellowship** is open to professional gardeners from Japan & the UK, as well as Longwood Gardens students and alumni, recruiting every autumn.

But I Can't Speak Japanese!

Language and cultural differences are a barrier to work exchange in Japan, as most people in Japan can't speak much English. However, a small amount of studying can go a long way and it is surprising how much you can communicate through a shared understanding of horticulture.

Simply being able to introduce yourself and understand common courtesies can really help, and it doesn't take long to learn these.

There are lots of free resources online. I recommend

<https://www.tofugu.com/>

<http://www.guidetojapanese.org/learn/>



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