

AHH — ZEN GARDENS



COURTESY OF KOHEI OWATARI

Kohei Owatari created a contemplative setting with an Asian lantern, bamboo spout, stone basin, water and pebbles amid a softscape of plants.

DESCRIBE A ZEN GARDEN and adjectives like “contemplative” and “serene” come to mind. Design one and you tap into a disciplined garden style that is contemporary despite a history spanning centuries. At once simple and complex, these minimalist refuges are prized for their ability to quiet the mind.

Valley Center landscape designer Kohei Owatari and San Diego landscape architect Takendo Arie are masters of this style that originated in Zen Buddhist monasteries in medieval Japan. Kohei is consulting on renovations of the renowned Asian-style landscape designed by Takendo decades ago

at Escondido’s Golden Door spa. He also has contributed to the Zen garden at the Naval Hospital in Camp Pendleton.

“It takes a lot of hard study to make these simple gardens,” says Kohei of designs that primarily rely on boulders, gravel and few plants to suggest mountain or watery vistas. “They are kind of a less-is-more way to represent nature and are very tranquil.”

Takendo, who also designed Sea World’s Japanese Garden and one of this magazine’s 2014 Gardens of the Year, believes that Zen gardens fit today’s modern architecture, shrinking home lots and demand for low-maintenance landscapes.

“They are ideal for a small area where it might not be sunny and is hard for growing,” he says. “It’s possible to make it a beautiful spot, where you experience nature with your imagination.”

Simplicity is the most important element, both designers emphasize. “You have to avoid clutter, color and too much of anything,” Kohei says.

Here are some other essential components for a Zen garden.

Stone — Boulders in a variety of sizes and shapes symbolize mountains or islands. They are carefully grouped in odd numbers to achieve balance and harmony. When properly placed, “they will feel right to you,” Kohei says.

Gravel — Pebble-sized white or salt-and-pepper mixes are a metaphor for water that flows around jagged boulders. Often it is raked to create ripples and eddies that bring movement to the garden. “It’s a very soft, soothing effect and helps keep the garden from feeling dry like a desert,” Takendo says.

Plants — Soft mosses and crusty-looking lichens are ideal Zen garden companions. To get these moisture lovers to grow on a boulder at the Golden Door, Takendo recalls, “We kept the stone and gravel wet.” As a substitute, Kohei suggests dwarf mondo grass that forms dense, slowly spreading clumps.

Water — Basins of hollowed-out stone or ceramic with simple bamboo spouts are preferred over larger water features. In ancient gardens, they were used to cleanse hands and by association the soul, Kohei says.

Walls — Built of stone or bamboo, walls enclose and seclude the garden. Sometimes, trees are planted outside the wall where their canopies can be appreciated from within, like a “borrowed” view.

Seating — If there is room, a simple, solid-wood bench or even a large, flat stone is added. “They help you relax,” Takendo says. ❖