



April Amblings: The Meditation Garden

The Meditation Garden is a tranquil refuge tucked away at the edge of Frog Lake and the Arboretum. This serene space offers visitors an intimate setting for contemplating nature and embarking on a journey of discovery.

The rolling landscape, the waterfall, the woodland garden, and the lake itself, were all constructed around the turn of the 20th century by J.B. Duke. In the 1930's the space was reimagined by Doris Duke using only natural elements such as earth, stone, wood, water, and plantings. Her esthetic was strongly influenced by Asian style gardens, especially traditional Japanese Stroll Gardens that she experienced on her travels around the world. The result is a landscape that appears to have been created by natural forces.

To this day, the act of meandering through the Meditation Garden allows us to embark on a journey of self-discovery and helps us connect with the quiet beauty of nature.



Below is a map of Duke Farms with the Meditation Garden labels with a star icon at the top of the map.





The red arched bridge with the black finials is the entry point for Meditation Garden. Crossing the bridge over the lake transports us from the hustle and bustle of our daily lives to a shady sanctuary where nature rules.



As you walk over the bridge, take a moment to gaze at the tree covered mound across the water. The fundamental structure of the landscape is defined by mature plantings of conifers which keep the space green in winter, spring, summer, and fall. Some of the evergreens include white pine, spruce, yew, juniper, cryptomeria, and hemlock. Together they seem to create a tapestry woven with diverse shades and textures of green; a sight that soothes in every season. On a sunny day, the green scape is mirrored in the lake, giving the effect of an impressionist painting on sky and water.

Interspersed among the evergreens are impressive native and imported specimen trees, most of which were planted nearly a hundred years ago. Their silver winter skeletons, spring blooms and vibrant fall colors provide us with an ever-changing view that never ceases to please the eye. These include:

Sycamore maple	<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>	Non-native
Sugar maple	<i>Acer saccharum</i>	Native
Japanese maple	<i>Acer palmatum</i>	Non-native (w/ palmate leaves)
American basswood	<i>Tilia Americana</i>	Native
Redbud	<i>Cersis Canadensis</i>	Flowering native
Flowering dogwood	<i>Cornus florida</i>	Flowering dogwood
Saucer magnolia	<i>Magnolia soulangeana</i>	Flowering non-native
Double file viburnum	<i>Viburnum plicatum f. tomentosum 'Mariesii'</i>	Flowering non-native shrub
Cherry	<i>Prunus serotina and Prunus spp.</i>	Flowering native & non-native
Fringe tree	<i>Chionanthus virginicus</i>	Flowering native
Oak leaf hydrangea	<i>Hydrangea quercifolia</i>	Flowering shrub



Journey Through the Garden

Once you are in the garden, there’s much to explore. In addition to the noteworthy list of trees, there are three other awe-inspiring specimens that you must seek out. The first is the ancient silver maple (*Acer saccharinum*) that hugs the bank of the lake. It’s massive trunk and enormous burl give the tree a life-like persona. And if you’re a tree hugger, then this craggy old hardwood will undoubtedly make you want to start hugging. Although its true age is unknown, this tree has probably been growing on this spot since J.B. Duke first started to develop the area in the early 1900’s. The maple is an old soul standing watch over the garden.

Ancient silver maple watches over the garden. Photo courtesy of C. Turner Ward



Two other exquisite trees that help define the Garden are the cut-leaf Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum dissectum*) that were planted adjacent to the arbor by Miss Duke in the 1930's. Over the years the trees were meticulously pruned and trained to emphasize the sinuous nature of the branching. The cutleaf Japanese maple gets its name from its deeply cut leaves which grow on smooth undulating branches. Each lobe is finely serrated giving it a delicate lacy texture. The trees are living works of art; they should not be missed!

As you explore the garden, keep your eye open for wildlife. If you have binoculars, the Meditation Garden is a wonderful spot to do a little bird watching. The space is often quieter than many areas of the property and it's a pleasure to just listen to the bird songs and communications. Look for waterfowl in the lake such as wood ducks, teal, and mallards. The long-legged waders like the great blue heron and green heron can often be spotted fishing in the shallows. In winter, the resident woodland birds like chickadees, nuthatches and titmice are abundant.



Cutleaf Japanese maple; photo courtesy of C. Turner Ward

And in spring look and listen for the bright orange and black Baltimore oriole, the yellow warbler, and the yellow throat with his black zorro-like mask that all nest in the area. And keep your eyes and ears open for the many other migrants stopping by for a little rest on their journeys north. In addition to the birds, search the shoreline and rocks for reptiles and amphibians like green frogs, bull frogs, painted turtles, red bellied turtles, and even the occasional snake or two.

As for the Meditation Garden itself, the paths are sinuous and wind through the space. Take your time to meander slowly along them and to linger in spots that appeal to your senses. The garden includes many Asian inspired features that have roots in gardens from the East, especially traditional Japanese Gardens. They are situated throughout with the intention of imbuing the space with spiritual and symbolic meaning. One pleasant activity is to review the list of elements that are in the garden below, read the possible interpretations of their symbolism, then see if you can find them all. It's a Meditation Garden treasure hunt!

Activity: Search for the Enduring Symbols in the Garden

The red bridge: Crossing the bridge over the lake is meant to symbolize leaving our everyday world and crossing into another place where we can escape our stress for a few glorious minutes. Red is a traditional color for a garden bridge because red was thought to offer protection and provide safe passage.



Red bridge in winter; photo courtesy of Abby Schmid



General garden and path design: This space was originally designed in such a way that the garden would reveal itself a little at a time. Curiosity and imagination are meant to be piqued by suggestion and an air of mystery adds to the ambiance.

Different pathways of varying materials control our movements through the garden. Earthen walkways, paths of small steppingstones with irregular spacing, paths of uneven surfaces, paths of shifting directions, etc. all feel different underfoot and make us be aware of the moment. Like the sinuous stream, the paths are meant to symbolize the path through the life. The main function of the paths is to connect all the individual garden elements. Paths are like little streams weaving through the space providing us with many choices of ways to follow, but with no final destination. Enjoy the journey!

Water: Water symbolizes the continuous flow of time and stages of life. Water elements here include the lake, the stream, and the waterfall. The lake's shape, irregular coastline, peninsulas, and islands create an illusion of great space in a small area. The stream, with its winding watercourse, and the waterfall represent life's journey as we wind our way from birth (the top of the falls) to the path of chaotic youth (the full fall of water) through the turbulence of adulthood into middle age (where the fall hits the rocks below) and finally to the silent still waters of old age.



Islands: Islands often represent "heaven or paradise"; they are sometimes said to be the place where deceased ancestors dwell and are called the *Isles of the Immortals*. Our island is shaped like tortoise, which is a symbol of longevity. Sometimes islands are also shaped like the crane, another symbol of longevity and good fortune.

Building materials: Only natural elements of stone, water, wood, and plants were used to build the garden. Stone often represents endurance and time; water represents life, wood represents growth over time; evergreens represent longevity, and flowering plants and trees are used sparingly, representing seasonality. Colors are subdued in harmony with nature. The one big exception is the arched bridge that crosses over the lake.

Lanterns: Lanterns may serve as mere architectural accents or lighting, but often represent enlightenment along the "path" through life. The lanterns placed in the garden here are called kasuga lanterns; they consist of five parts. The lowest pedestal touching the ground represents earth, the next level represents water, the next is fire, the top elevation is air that is then capped with spirit or heaven. The lantern in the lake is called a snow viewing lantern. Such a lantern is placed in or near the lake to break up the scene of a monotonous snow filled landscape in winter and to remind the viewer of the seasons of life and the importance of the present moment.





Plantings: Shades of green are created with the careful selection of trees and plantings. Pines, spruces, and hemlocks were planted to represent longevity and happiness. Evergreens of all kinds represent longevity, good health, and good fortune. Cherry and magnolia represent vigor and patience as they are some of the first trees to bloom after a long winter. The viburnums bloom early in the spring as do the azaleas. Again, these are reminders that life endures the trials of winter.

The cutleaf Japanese maples were trained and pruned to grow with the sinuous shapes we see. Once again representing the twisting journey through life as they offer shade and protection in the garden space.

The mass plantings of trees, shrubs and evergreens provides the image of a tranquil painting that changes slightly every single day. As autumn comes, the greens change to gold and brown. The leaves fall, and the winter landscape is textured gray, but the evergreens provide images of hope that spring will soon return.

The Arbor and komainu: The garden structure provides a place for rest and contemplation. It is an arbor and not a teahouse in the true sense. In the past, guests did enjoy tea here in the garden but not in a formal tea ritual.

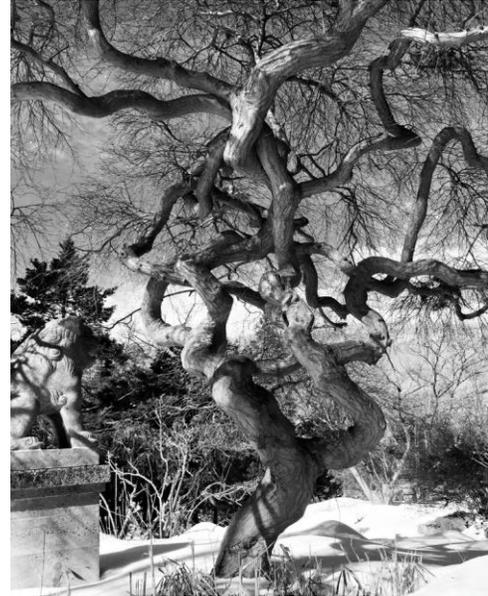
The Korean dogs or *komainu* are statues that are symbols of protection that have origins in China where they were known as Foo Dogs. These symbols found their way to Japan via Korea, hence the name Korean Dogs. They are also often called lion dogs or Buddhistic lions. We see one lion with its mouth open and the other with its mouth closed. This represents the cycle of the universe - the beginning and the end of the cycle of life. Everything comes full circle.

To this day, there is much symbolism that endures into the Meditation Garden. As you explore the garden, the elements you notice are open to interpretation and may speak to you in different ways that have personal meaning for you. So, meander through the garden and unveil the mysteries of the Garden for yourself.

Additional Resources

[Symbolism and Esthetics in the Traditional Japanese Garden; An Introduction by Dr. Koicha Kawana; Authenticity in Japanese Landscape Design; David Slawson, March 2001; Brooklyn Botanical Gardens Elements of the Japanese Garden; Bowdoin University;](#)

*Note: Other photos not labeled courtesy of Mrs. Bird



Cutleaf Japanese maple in Winter. Photo courtesy of Thom Almendinger



View of the Arbor and Japanese maple in fall; photo courtesy of C Turner Ward