Time and the Garden

by Corinne Kennedy

Time is a garden design element often overlooked. We’re most apt to view time in terms of seasons, focusing on how to have continuous blooms as spring transitions through summer and fall—or how to make our gardens more attractive in late fall and winter, when deciduous plants have lost their leaves and flowers are few or absent. Yet we forget to consider how gardens change over the years or anticipate how quickly nature—or our own actions—can sabotage our designs. We’d be wise to heed Patricia Thorpe’s warning that all gardens “need serious reassessment and replanting every seven to 10 years.”

Unlike paths, walls and other hardscape, which are fixed in position and deteriorate slowly, plantings are in a constant state of flux—and are never truly finished artifacts. Even relatively simple, naturalistic gardens will soon decline if we’re not committed to maintaining them. The focus of this entry in the “Elements of Design” series is on planting design: how plantings evolve over years and decades, and how to maintain our original design intent.

The photos I’ve chosen are from the Seattle Japanese Garden at Washington Park Arboretum, designed in 1959 by landscape architect Juki Iida to express the Japanese principles of naturalness and the way natural elements age and spread. Unlike Western gardens—with their extended periods of bloom—Japanese gardens acknowledge and celebrate the fleeting nature of beauty and the changes that take place both seasonally and over many years. Although the Japanese Garden is a relatively large and specialized public garden, the strategies it uses to address the complexities of time can be applied to home gardens of any size or design style.
Patience and Preparedness
In the U.S., we tend to be impatient about our gardens, expecting them to look attractive as soon as they’re installed. Is it any wonder that we overplant them, and they look overgrown in just a few years? Despite our wishes, plants continue to grow, and gardens are processes rather than results. We begin to lose control as soon as we finish planting. Plants grow taller and wider than expected, all too quickly crowding other plants, paths and patios. The sunny garden becomes shady. Some plants are too vigorous and take over, while others die or fail to thrive. Views, open space and plant diversity are lost.

As you begin the design process for your garden, consider the longevity and competitiveness of the plants you’re selecting and the maintenance and interventions they’ll require. Choose plants that will grow well in your environment, adapt to changing conditions, and—if possible—have a long season of interest. Be observant and prepared to respond effectively if your garden is evolving in unanticipated ways.

To create a sustainable planting plan, it’s important to consider the types of plants you’ll be using—trees, shrubs, perennials and groundcovers—and how they develop and interact over time. (Even if you don’t intend to plant any trees, there may be neighboring ones that will eventually affect your space!) The trick is to shape the various layers of your garden to create a plant community that will be long-lived. A good place to look for ideas is in a forest setting, where natural plant dynamics play out over long time spans.

Learning from Natural Succession
In nature, plants relate to one another in a given space over time through the ecological process of succession. Different waves of colonization, establishment and extinction lead to successive changes in the complexity of the plant community. Initially, short-lived “pioneer” plants begin growing on bare ground. Often annuals and biennials that germinate from seed and thrive in sunny conditions, these plants grow quickly but are not persistent. Gradually, they are outcompeted by more slow-growing but longer-lived plants such as herbaceous perennials and grasses. Eventually, many of the perennials are replaced by a more stable “climax” community dominated by woody plants. Each stage facilitates the next, and a disturbance (such as a tree falling down) can restart the process over again.

Though a certain amount of natural succession takes place in most gardens—as the plants...
in our borders battle it out for dominance—it’s perhaps more useful to think of it as an analogy that can help us anticipate how our gardens will evolve over time. When we plant a garden, we usually plant all the different stages of succession at once—pioneers, perennials and climax plants. It shouldn’t surprise us, then, when perennials quickly start to push out our annuals, and trees overshadow and negatively impact nearby sun-loving perennials and shrubs.

Equipped with this knowledge, we can better predict changes over time and plant accordingly. If we know a tree will be casting lots of dense shade in a given space in a matter of years—or creating drier soils—we can underplant with shrubs, perennials and groundcovers that can adapt to those developing conditions. Trees and shrubs are the larger, more permanent elements of the garden, providing continuity and attractiveness seasonally and over the years. Knowing their mature size and spread will not only help you choose plants that don’t outgrow their space but also create a planting plan of lasting value.

**Addressing the Challenges of Time**

Even if you anticipate these changes, and take issues of crowding and encroaching shade into consideration, it can be difficult to predict accurately how well and quickly your plants will grow, or if problems will arise. So many factors come into play—including weather conditions, pests and diseases—not to mention the amount of time that you yourself are able to devote to the garden.

Various strategies can help you address time-related challenges. Always space your plants according to their mature spread and height. Your new garden may have an empty appearance for a while, but be patient. One way to deal with the problem is to specify “temporary” plants that will quickly grow and fill in the spaces but then disappear after a few years. Examples include showy perennials such as *Delphinium* and *Echinacea*; short-lived shrubs and herbs like *Hebe* and *Lavandula*; and low grasses and grass-like plants such as *Festuca*, *Acorus* and *Carex*. Whether naturally short-lived or susceptible to being shaded out by other plants, they won’t be essential to your vision or your garden’s evolution.

A plant that grows too large or fails to thrive can be removed, cut back, or replaced by a younger plant of the same species, until it too outgrows the space. Dying or unattractive plants...
that are not shade tolerant can be replaced by more shade-tolerant species. When plants become too competitive or weedy, you’ll need to make thoughtful decisions about which ones to restrict or eliminate.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, dry summers exacerbate the issue of shade under large deciduous trees and shrubs. Many of your original plants may not survive, and you may need to replace them with spring ephemerals, early-blooming bulbs, and perennials that are summer-dormant.

As time passes, consider whether your original design is being realized. If it’s not, and your design does not seem salvageable, think about the possibility of a new balance of plant species—or an entirely new vision.

**Time in the Seattle Japanese Garden**

Additional strategies to address the effects of time are commonly used in Japanese-style gardens. Trees and shrubs are pruned in traditional shapes to maintain a size in balance with the garden’s other plants and design elements. Pruning is also used to highlight the attractiveness of seasonal changes and the powerful branching architecture that many trees develop over time. Plants that no longer fulfill their role in the garden’s design are replaced, sometimes by hardscape instead of other plants. Wooden support posts help extend the life of declining woody plants, but eventually the plants will die and be removed. With time, even healthy trees and shrubs—grown so large that scale and proportion are lost—may be cut down.

Occasionally a garden develops a positive life of its own, even though its original design has been lost or obscured. Kyoto’s Saiho-ji temple garden, overtaken by moss after decades without maintenance, became a uniquely beautiful “moss garden” renowned throughout the world. The photo on page 7, of our Seattle garden’s roji (teahouse garden) illustrates how beautifully moss spreads under favorable conditions. If a similar process occurs in your garden, why not embrace it?

As a docent of the Seattle Japanese Garden, I share with visitors a public garden with a decades-long time frame. Next time you visit, try to observe how the gardeners have responded to the challenges of passing time and maintain a garden that celebrates this natural process. You may find their strategies useful for preserving the resilience and longevity of your own garden.

**References**


**Corinne Kennedy** is a Seattle Japanese Garden guide, frequent contributor to the garden’s blog, and retired garden designer.