



Stepping into Another World

**Text and photos
by Jeff Minnich**

Who says small gardens can't be just as full and captivating as their larger counterparts? There are challenges, yes ... Yet, the final product can be more surprising than you can imagine. A Northern Virginia couple dreamed of such a garden and they got what they wished for.

The clients had some clear ideas. They wanted a gracious entryway. They wanted water, and they envisioned a bridge crossing a small water feature. The husband is of Japanese descent, and both are California natives, where Asian-themed gardens are numerous. Both were aware of the Japanese influence in many Washington, DC-region gardens (and were well aware of the Japanese Cherries around the Tidal

Basin, of course), so they wished for the same theme in their own garden. They envisioned a low-maintenance — and who doesn't wish for that trait, nowadays — peaceful retreat, and an escape from their busy lives and jobs in the city. Initially, the area felt hot, sunny, and dry in the summer; cold, dark, and icy in the winter. It's surrounded by six-foot-high brick walls on three sides and the house on the fourth ... Great on one hand because it's private and quiet, yet still and stifling in the heat of summer. And it is small: just 14 feet by 18 feet.

Designing a small space is often really fun, yet very challenging. For one thing, many elements have to fit into a very limited area. The sense of scale must feel right, and the selected plants



Before

must not only fit into restricted spaces, but not outgrow those spots in a short period of time. Unlike large gardens, which are often viewed from a distance, small gardens are seen up close. Every detail is right there, and every detail counts.

And then, of course, the garden has to be installed. This can be tough in a small space, especially when that space is severely restricted by high brick walls. This is a common challenge in many of the older parts of the DC region, such as Georgetown or Old Towne Alexandria.

I was once told by an interior design friend: "Don't be afraid to use large accessories — they can add great interest." Instead of putting a bunch of little knick-knacks on a coffee table, put a large vase, or a couple of large candlesticks. Surprise with the larger scale, the unexpected. The same holds true in a garden. Something large in the foreground, for instance, can create a sense of a larger space — and often a sense of mystery and surprise. What's behind that tree? Where does that hidden path lead? Why not use a large stone rather than a tiny one? Nature doesn't select the sizes ... It is what it is. Tiny gardens don't require tiny elements. There's a lesson here.

In this case, we wanted to create a space that looked as if it had been sliced right from the wild in Japan and set in this courtyard, so we used curves, natural stone, and plants that



had natural forms, not tightly pruned or contrived. To fit the pond into such a square, tight space, it was curved into a crescent shape. The stone walk would curve from the gate to a bridge crossing the center of the crescent, then curve over to the front entryway. The pond curve is exaggerated; the walk curve, less so. The waterfall boulder would be placed in the far left corner, for depth and perspective — and it would be visible from a bench at the front entryway and a bay window in the kitchen area. No matter what the season, the garden was to be enjoyed from the inside, or walking through it on the outside. All around the perimeter of the courtyard would be plantings to soften the hard brick walls and help settle the water feature into the landscape. The plants would be the “tape” holding everything together.

During the design process, we talked about using a rubber liner inside the pond versus using a harder surface on the inside walls and bottom of the pond. Future repair needs were dis-

cussed — and the lack of space to conduct such repairs — and it was decided to make the pond out of gunnite, which is a product used on the inside of swimming pools. Once we laid out the shape of the pond, forms with metal reinforcing material were built. Long before the gunnite was blown into the form, we had selected the large stone that would act as the bridge crossing the pond. We measured and measured to be sure the bridge would fit securely and tightly once the pond was built. Gunnite day was exciting! A few days later, after the gunnite had dried, the stones lining the edges of the pond were brought in and placed. The fieldstone pathway connecting the front gate, bridge, and front entryway was laid on stone dust. Gravel was added between the field stones, and here and there to fill tight spaces. Time for planting!

Inspired by Japan, we chose Nandina, (*Nandina domestica*) for the area behind the waterfall. Walking through the front gate, the visitor looks straight into a Red-leafed Japanese Laceleaf Maple (*Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum* ‘Crimson Queen’).

As this tree has grown, it has blocked the direct view from the gate to the front entryway — the visitor has to walk slightly around it to get to the front door. Elsewhere throughout the garden: Liriope (*Liriope muscari*); Mondo Grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*); Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*); English Spreading Yew, (*Taxus baccata* ‘Repandens’), among others.

Since the garden was installed over 10 years ago, a large Bradford Pear and White Pine were removed from the outside of

the garden walls. Some of the original plants languished from the increased sun and heat, and have been removed. Like all gardens, things grow and change ...but the bones of this garden remain strong.

At the end of a long workday, the clients often sit on the bench outside their front door and relax. The shadows cast by the plants, the sounds of the flowing water and the birds that constantly come in and out for a visit, the different colors and textures of the foliage — all their senses are stimulated and their minds and bodies relaxed. All provided by their little garden that is a tiny wedge of Japan. 🌿

Jeff Minnich is a landscape designer and horticulturist. He depends on the beauty of natural materials and the wonderful diversity of the world of plants when he designs gardens. Additionally, his extensive travels give him a fresh perspective on how the rest of the world creates gardens. Jeff Minnich Garden Design, Inc. is based in Arlington, VA. Jeff can be reached at 703.525.4540 or jeff@minnichgardendesign.com.

