



KOREAN GARDENS

Tradition, Symbolism and Resilience

by Jill Matthews

£30 Softcover; 978-1-56591-490-2



240 x 190 mm; 208 pages; 132 colour photos; 10 plans + diagrams. Endmatter consists of • Directory of Notable Gardens in Korea • Map of Korea showing Location of Gardens • Korean Dynasty List • Glossary of Korean Gardening Terms • Further Reading / Websites • Index

Koreans have been making distinctive and beautiful gardens for at least 2000 years and continue to do so. The profession of landscape designer was well established in Korea before a Japanese princess commissioned a Korean to design the first royal pleasure garden recorded in Japan. Few gardens in Europe, not even the earliest scientific botanic gardens in Padua and Firenze, are as old as the earliest surviving gardens in Korea. Many centuries before the great landed estates in England were installing their equivalents, Korean horticulturists had invented a form of insulated, heated, rice-straw-walled greenhouse.

The Korean peninsula is unfortunately situated between China and the Japanese archipelago. An unavoidable consequence of this has been constant invasion from both directions since prehistoric times. Sometimes relatively benign and involving the peaceful adoption by the Korean elite of foreign ideas such as Chinese orthography, literature, Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. More often they have been violent and characterised by the deliberate destruction of Korean cultural heritage, including gardens. In historic times there were major violent invasions by the Han starting in 109 BC and a very damaging series of invasions by the Mongols 1231-1270. However, by far the most destructive invasions have been by the Japanese. The invasions by General Toyotomi Hideyoshi (the *Imjin Wars*) between 1592 and 1598 involved the burning down of almost every wooden building in Korea: palaces, temples and garden pavilions included. It is almost impossible to visit an old garden in Korea today where the signage does not state that it was partially or fully destroyed during these invasions. This tradition of vandalism and attempted cultural genocide by the Japanese continued during their occupation of modern Korea between 1910 and 1945. The Korean War (1950-53) also involved major destruction. It left Korea divided and South Korea so devastated and impoverished that its remaining resources were needed for the population's survival and could not be spared for aesthetic needs until relatively recently.

However the Koreans are extremely resilient and their economic recovery had been fast and sustained and the government has begun again to restore and reconstruct many gardens, such as those surrounding the royal palaces in Seoul. Families and descendants of the original garden-makers have once again assumed responsibility for the maintenance and reconstruction, of their ancestors' gardens.

Despite these repeated invasions and wars, a surprising number of gardens have survived, some very ancient. It is uncertain how many have survived in North Korea, but in the South the oldest remnant of a pleasure garden, the *Haeamjeong Pavilion* in Gangwondo province, was first built in 1361 and rebuilt five hundred years ago in 1530. *Gungnamji*, a beautiful pond first created in AD 634 by the Baekje dynasty King Mu as part of his palace garden, still exists, although opinions differ about the accuracy of its restoration. Most of the surviving gardens in South Korea are from the Silla (57BC-935) and Joseon (1392-1910) periods.

The profession of Landscape Architect is a highly respected one. Several contemporary Korean banknotes feature famous Confucian scholar-gardeners and their gardens. The ongoing 'Greening of Seoul' project, which includes the planting and transplanting of hundreds of thousands of street trees, major new landscaping of urban green space and civic subsidies for the creation of numerous and sustainable roof gardens in the city, is testament to this. It is an astonishing example of cultural continuity to see how many of these modern gardens, and how much of this recent landscaping, are rooted in the old gardening styles and symbols.

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Western Gardeners' Guide to the Essence of Korean Traditional Gardens Korean gardens strive to be in harmony with nature and to encourage the quiet contemplation of the natural world. They are intentionally humble in their conception and very different from Japanese and Chinese gardens. Korean gardens deserve to be more widely appreciated in the West as a separate, distinctive, venerable and continuing garden tradition, capable of wide appeal if better known. They are the unknown treasures among the world's gardening traditions. The survival and continuous restoration of old Korean gardens demonstrate the cultural resilience and tenacity of the Korean people despite their tumultuous history. This book introduces, describes and explains traditional Korean gardens to Western readers. It contains more than one hundred photos and maps and details of 20 notable gardens.

Horticulturists today often unknowingly cultivate plants and trees native to Korea in our western gardens. This exquisitely written book will entice any keen gardener or plantsman to make a visit to see them in traditional Korean gardens. –Tony Kirkham, Head of the Arboretum, Gardens and Horticultural Services, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, England.

The 'foot' and the 'mind' must be put to use to understand the genuine aesthetics of the Korean garden. The author has spared no foot-work nor mindful deliberation to successfully deliver the essence of the Korean garden. This book will guide those who wish to discover the true beauty of the Korean garden: its harmony with nature, reflection on the inner-world, and yearning toward the outside world. –Professor Sung Jong-sang, Department of Landscape Architecture Dean Graduate School of Environmental Studies, Seoul National University, Korea.



published by
Hollym

Represented by

Kodansha Europe Ltd.

info@kodansha.eu / www.kodansha.eu

Trade distribution
and fulfilment by **TURNAROUND PUBLISHER SERVICES**



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