

December 24, 2020 Park Views Column
Japanese Garden Renovation
By APRC Director; Michael A. Black, AICP

The Lithia Park Japanese-style garden has a history as old as the Park itself. As early as 1908, when the independent Parks Commission was formed by City Charter, the idea of a “City Park” was being promoted by many prominent Ashland residents, including members of the Ladies Chautauqua Park Club. By 1914, land had been dedicated for the park and a prominent park designer named John McLaren was hired to consult with Park Commissioners and City businesses and civic leaders about the future of a grand park in the heart of Ashland.

McLaren, who is mostly known for his many years as the Park Superintendent of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, believed that Ashland was unique in its natural capacity to support an outstanding city park. No doubt, the physical environment and geography were key to McLaren’s affection for Ashland, but the community and civic support for creating the park was also key in his declaration that few places in America were as naturally suited for a showcase park as Ashland.

The plan that McLaren produced for Ashland contained many new and exciting features, like an area for car camping, a zoo with donkey rides, beautiful fountains and ponds, walking paths and a Japanese-style garden. The Japanese-style garden was established very early in the process of building Lithia Park (1916) and over time, the space has become one of the most endearing physical locations in Lithia Park and in Ashland.

Over the garden’s 100+ year history, the need for restoration has been evident in timeframes of about 35 years. The first restoration of the garden was after the initial construction took place in the 1950s when Parks Superintendent Chet Corry enhanced the space with several new trees, including a Southern magnolia, Maple trees, Crabapple and others. From the 1950s until the 1980s the garden experienced ebbs and flows of use and by 1983, the garden needed restoration again.

Many years had passed since Chet Corry restored the garden, 33 years in fact, and the living portion of the garden, always aging and growing, needed care and restoration again. Ashland Parks Horticulturist, Donn Todt led the effort to restore the garden again in the 1980s. Todt was successful in garnering support and donations to add Maple trees, rock paths, irrigation and most of the amenities that exist in the garden today.

The year 2021 marks 38 years since the last major restoration. The garden, which is still beloved by those familiar with it, is showing many signs of its age. Additionally, some recent improvements have drawn light on the fact that the Japanese-style garden is not culturally accurate. The garden mimics a traditional Japanese Garden but lacks the cultural distinctions and accuracies of Traditional Japanese Gardens.

With the addition of the Torii Gate in 2015, it became clear that the garden had gone beyond being a replica of a traditional Japanese Garden, to violating cultural and religious accuracies that have been part of Japanese culture for thousands of years. After the Torii Gate was erected, APRC was faced with not only an aging garden, but a very passionate plea from members of the Japanese American community to fix the cultural inaccuracies in the garden. Serendipity may have played a role in what

happened next, but whatever the cause, Jeff Mangin, a local resident with a passion for Lithia Park and the Japanese-style garden, came forward and offered to cover the full cost of the restoration of the Japanese Garden. Jeff and his late wife, Beatrice Marechal, grew to love the garden over their years of wandering its paths and finding peace in the tranquility of the place. Following Beatrice's passing, Jeff was looking for a way to honor her memory.

After a year of planning the details of the donation, Jeff worked with APRC and the Ashland Parks Foundation to donate the funds, select a qualified designer and create a plan that would meet the criteria of a) restoring the garden; b) enhancing its stature to a traditional and authentic Japanese Garden while improving the appearance and function; c) ensuring that the improvements would be accessible to residents with mobility challenges; and, d) that those improvements would be long-lasting and sustainable over time.

A search for a qualified Japanese Garden designer resulted in the selection of Toru Tanaka, a Japanese trained garden designer and the former Director of the Portland Japanese Garden. Plans were developed that met all the criteria above and a fund was established by Mr. Mangin to cover the anticipated construction costs and maintenance costs for a minimum of ten years after construction.

In 2019, the garden was ready for presentation to the public and the Parks Commissioners. After a passionate public review process that ultimately resulted in an approved Japanese Garden plan that met the values of all involved, construction started on the garden restoration and redesign in early November of 2020.

The Japanese Garden will be under construction for a period of two years. The project is being constructed by Toru Tanaka, of Japanese Garden Specialties and will be overseen by APRC. The plans for the garden were vetted through a process that lasted more than a year and anyone can view those plans on our website at ashland.or.us/JapaneseGardenDesign, or outside the project fence on the north and south project information kiosks. The total cost of the project is \$1,380,000 and is being funded completely by Jeff Mangin through the Ashland Parks Foundation.

We look forward to opening an authentic Japanese Garden in the Fall of 2022. We will provide updates along the way, and we hope to see you all in Lithia Park enjoying the many other amenities the park offers in the meantime.