

# The astrological garden

by Annette Fechner

## The symbolic garden - a way of self-reflection



As opposed to our Western gardens, Japanese Zen gardens are highly symbolic. In them, particular symbols are represented by plants, water, rocks and stones, sand and gravel, architectural as well as decorative elements. The plants symbolise harmony and plenty, the rocks and stones stand for space and energy, and sand and gravel give simplicity and serenity. Water provides balance and silence, the architectural elements create different perspectives and visual foci, and the decorative elements offer stimulation and beauty. This kind of garden art goes even further. It integrates symbols that are part of ancient, bequeathed myths. The creators of these gardens considered it their duty to commemorate the myths and with them the ancient circle of life in the world. People are invited to contemplate in the garden, commemorate their ancestors and the cosmic order, and to feel that they themselves,

as human beings, are part of the cosmos.

This kind of garden art is charged with spiritual meaning through its symbolism. This is something which is lacking in our contemporary, Western garden design. We are mainly concerned with functionality (the patio has to be large enough for a table, six chairs and a barbecue) and aesthetic design. And because of our continuous search for general criteria of beauty, we tend to forget that what people perceive as beautiful is completely subjective, like all other perception. I am absolutely in favour of a 'functioning' and functional garden (this is obviously not the case, if one table leg is stuck in the shrubs), and of course, it should also be beautiful - in the eyes of the owners. But a garden can combine functionality and beauty with symbolic content! This is the beginning of an 'astro-botanical self-reflection'.

It makes little sense, however, to fill our Western gardens with Japanese myths and symbols, because we have a different cultural background. Our myths and archetypal images are completely different from those of the Far East. Astrology, however, has long been rooted in occidental culture and uses images which we also use in our fairy-tales and myths. Even in our "enlightened" age, we can find "vertical" thinking in proverbs. For example, we consider it "lucky" to "knock on wood", and "luck" is astrologically represented by Jupiter. The number three is also associated with Jupiter as well as with luck, as in "three times lucky" or "third time is a charm".



All these considerations led me to develop the concept of astrological garden design. The garden offers the opportunity to physically represent the ancient principles and archetypes inherent in nature. We are surrounded by these principles every time we go into the garden. This leads to a deeper understanding of our own chart and of astrology - because they become visible. Astrological gardening can thus be considered as a creative approach to the symbolic language of astrology.

Everything in the astrological garden can represent an archetype. Nothing is left to chance or prevailing fashion. The choice of plants and materials as well as the shaping of the garden can represent a particular symbolism. This requires "vertical" thinking, i.e. thinking in analogies like in astrology.

There are different ways to find out which archetype or planet should be represented. A simpler kind of astrological garden design is the composition of an elemental garden. The four elements fire, earth, air and water are - like the planets - important symbols in astrology which can be used to interpret a horoscope. Planning a fire garden, for example, is easier than planning a Jupiter garden, because it needs less differentiation, and therefore more types of plants and building materials can be used for its realisation.



Let us now take a look at the individual elements and how they can be translated into particular garden designs.

## A fire garden

The fire garden is South-facing, which is where the warm winds come from. The North side of the garden is edged by bushes which serve as a 'sun trap' and shelter from cold winds so that the garden offers a climate for exotic plants. There is a centre which is dominated by a large tree or fireplace.

If the grounds are large enough, there can be a dominant tree as well as a fireplace. A red maple (*Acer rubrum*) would suit well. The bushes in the fire garden have red or orange blossoms or berries. Many of them have thorns, and in the autumn their leaves shine in bright golden and orange colours.



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The paths are generously laid-out and straight. They are covered in rough gravel or red cinder. Busy places or paths can also be paved with bright red cobblestones or yellow granite. Lush and strong growing twiners with large red, orange or yellow flowers - trumpet creepers (*Campsis radicans*), for example - grow on red-painted pergolas made of round timber. Red and yellow shrubs are blooming in generously laid-out beds.

If the garden is sufficiently large, there will be wide, open grassy spaces which are great for ball games and running competitions, or simply for lying on the back and contemplating the sky. The large patio is furnished with yellow wooden chairs and a table, and it has a garden fireplace or a cast iron barbecue. The patio is very spacious and provides room for large parties. Of course, there is also a place for sun bathing!

## An earth garden

The simplest form of an earth garden is an orchard or vegetable garden. If you prefer a decorative garden, however, it should be North-facing. If its size permits to plant a large tree, there will be a lime tree (*Tilia platyphyllos*). When it blossoms in early summer, thousands of bees and bumble bees fill the air with their humming. For smaller gardens, it is better to choose low-growing apple or other fruit trees.



An earth garden lends itself to create a swale. Part of the garden is somewhat lowered and there can be steps in different places which lead into the lower areas. It makes you feel as if you were moving deeper into the earth towards a cool and calm atmosphere. A large tree bestows shade and a brown bench invites you to stay and rest. From here, you have a lovely view at the formally designed shrub borders which are surrounded by accurately cut boxwood hedges. Some of the small paths which surround and divide the beds are made of dark red clinker and some of sand.

In the sunnier part of the garden, we grow roses and other fragrant shrubs and herbs. Even if this is not intended as a kitchen garden, kitchen and medicinal herbs, vegetables and berries are integrated here and there in the plantation. This part is also kept quite formal. The patio near the house has a falun-red pergola covered with rambler roses for a comfortable atmosphere. There are

little corners in the whole garden where people can sit unobserved, read or simply relax.

This garden definitely needs a tool shed with a work bench for potting and repotting plants and scions. Of course, the earth garden also contains a supply of fertilisers, a well-designed irrigation system and several compost heaps.

## An air garden

The air garden is a very open, hardly protected garden facing East. Here it is more important to get in touch with light and air than to have a place for relaxation and day-dreaming. It is also important to meet other people for mental exchange or for fun and games.

The leaves of the trees in this garden quiver and rustle at the lightest breeze. The blossoms and fragrance of the bushes and brushes attract many insects, bees, bumble bees and butterflies. In spring and summer, the air is filled with fluttering and humming. The paths are simple gravel or light grey concrete. They often take sudden, unexpected turns. Self-seeding herbs grow on the gravelled paths and in the splices of the pavement.

There are many sculptures and other pieces of art in this garden. They are placed in unusual places and many of them are made of shiny and glittering materials. Of course, there is also at least one swing. A colourful garden swing seat is found on the patio. If the garden is large enough for a tree, we find an elm tree (*ulmus glabra*) or a birch (*betula pendula*) with a tree house. From this airy place, the whole garden can be surveyed. And there has to be an empty space for playing music, dancing, playing, juggling and acting!

## A water garden

The most obvious water garden is of course a large pond with a marsh and reed area. If one does not want to make the largest part of the grounds into a watery area, there are several possibilities:

The water garden is West-facing, mystic and overgrown. It is full of labyrinthine paths, partly simple grass paths, partly mossy and slippery ones. But there are also bright, water-bound sand paths. For the busier walking areas, the paths can be fixed with gravel or sand stone slabs. There are no straight lines in this garden, everything is designed in organic shapes. Even the slightly overgrown patio has rounded edges and borders. All transitions are flowing rather than harsh.

If possible, this garden has a small brook or pond, maybe even a small waterfall. A typical representation of the watery archetype could also be a grotto which is hidden between dense bushes. There are many twiners with long, windy tendrils and light green, watery leaves, and many shrubs bloom white or light blue. The bushes have white blossoms, too, and bear white or black berries in the autumn. Ferns and herbage grow in the shadier places in the garden, whereas in the sunnier parts, we find high reeds.



A water garden has small, sheltered areas, e.g. spaces surrounded by reeds, or the above mentioned grottos which serve as retreats for contemplation. A water garden is - like an earth garden - a rather quiet garden, whereas there is always something happening in a fire or air garden.

