

› Gardens of ponds and islands, white sand and stones – a guide to Kyoto's gardens

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Kyoto was, from 794 until 1869, the Heian capital of Japan. As a city of considerable political and cultural importance, the gardens of Kyoto, including archaeological remains, provide gardens from every period and style, ranging from ancient to modern in an unbroken continuum. Over centuries, a mosaic of diverse gardens have been constructed in accordance with the social strata, cultural backgrounds and beliefs of people, ranging from aristocrats to townsfolk. In 2026, Kyoto will provide the venue for the 32nd International Horticultural Congress (www.ihc2026.org). To provide visitors and garden enthusiasts with a guide to Kyoto's historical gardens, I have grouped them into two broad categories: gardens of ponds and islands and gardens of white sand and stones. This division inevitably leaves out many gardens, including those focused on *roji* (the tea ceremony), or the naturalistic gardens of the Meiji period and the courtyard gardens of the *machiya* townhouses. Let us begin with Nijō Castle, which is scheduled as one of the congress excursions.

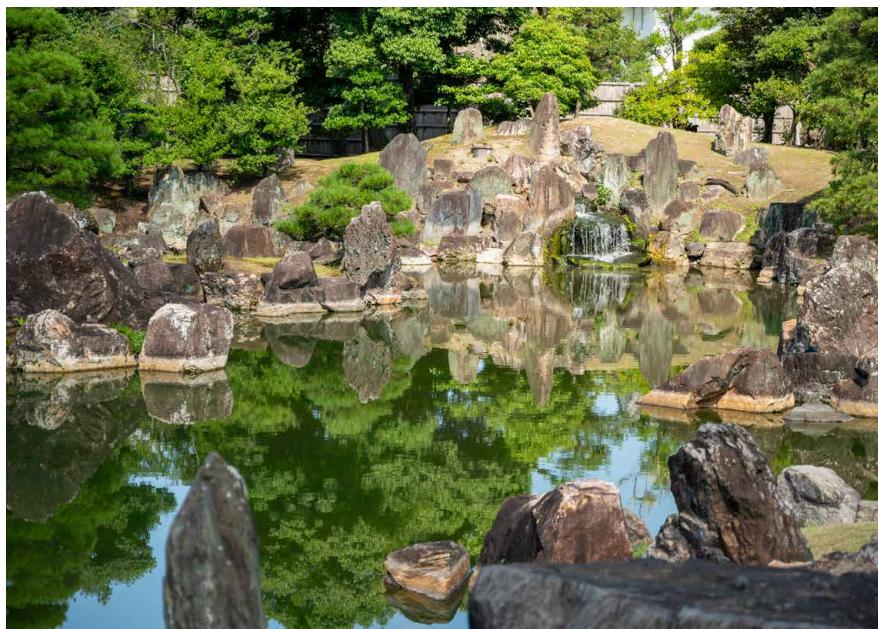


Figure 1. The Ninomaru Garden of Nijō Castle features a striking composition of ponds and islands – or bold arrangements of stones and pine trees (All garden photographs below were taken by the author).

Gardens of ponds and islands

Nijō Castle (Nakagyō Ward, Kyoto) was begun in 1602 by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), who had prevailed at the Battle of Sekigahara. The castle served as the shōgun's residence in Kyoto, as a venue for political ceremonies and, at the end of the Edo period, as the historical stage on which the shogunate returned political authority to the emperor. The Ninomaru Garden comprises an island-studded pond with black pines and gentle undulations. It is viewed from the west side of the zigzag-arranged halls and shoin (Figure 1).

In 1626, in anticipation of a visit by Emperor Go-Mizunō (1596-1680), the southern part of the garden was remodelled by Kobori Enshū (1579-1647), a technocrat of the shogunate. Although the group of buildings added at that time was later relocated or removed, surviving design drawings show that along the southern side of the pond, an imperial palace for the visit and a fishing pavilion were installed. From the present condition of the southern revetment stonework, it is

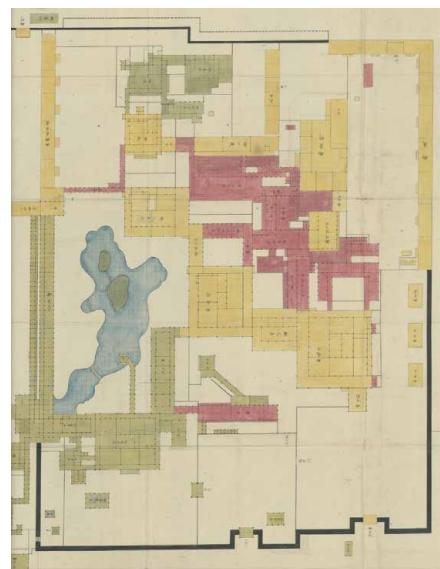


Figure 2. "Plan of Nijō Castle" (Kyoto University Library; detail, north oriented upward; <https://rmda.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/item/rb00021809>).

inferred that stones were added or repositioned so as to accommodate an imperial viewpoint (Figure 2).

The revetment stonework of the Ninomaru Garden is not merely intended to protect the water's edge: it is so grand in scale that it constitutes the garden's principal scenic feature, and the vigorous black pines produce an impression of excessive magnificence. This results from a design where the garden is viewed in close conjunction with the architecture and the sumptuous interior decorations, beginning with the Kano-school wall paintings. One may observe how Japanese gardens treat stone compositions as key scenic elements and, among the plants, emphasize the black pine.

Another garden that displays such magnificence is the Sampō-in Garden of Daigo-ji (Fushimi Ward, Kyoto) (Figure 3). Construction began in 1598 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), who wielded power in the preceding Azuchi-Momoyama period. After his death, it was completed by Gien (1558-1626). Like the Ninomaru Garden of Nijō Castle, the design centres on a pond before the shoin in which



Figure 3. Three-tiered waterfall seen across the pond in the Sampō-in Garden, Daigo-ji Temple.

an island floats. It too is furnished with powerful revetment stonework and accent stones. However, unlike the Ninomaru Garden, the Sampō-in Garden features a large change in elevation, something impossible to express with an artificial hill. The drop, created by the stonework and the three-tiered waterfall, provides a compelling force. Nevertheless, the garden simultaneously enjoys an expansiveness in that it blends seamlessly with the mountain that forms its backdrop. I started my discussion of Kyoto's "Gardens of Ponds and Islands" with the Ninomaru Garden primarily because the castle came into being by reclaiming and overwriting part of an older garden created during the Heian period. When you leave Nijō Castle, please proceed to the unremarkable little pond that adjoins its southern edge. Though little remains, Shinsenen is the surviving remnant of a vast imperial garden that predates the construction of both the Ninomaru and Sanbō-in gardens by eight centuries. Once adjoining the southeastern edge of the Daidairi of Heian-kyō, it was a pleasure ground where Emperor Kanmu (737-806) and his successors frequently came for boating, banqueting and viewing the blossom (Figure 4). Springs fed a winding watercourse (yarim-

izu) and pond that was once of an enormous scale, stretching from what is now the southern edge of Nijō Castle's Honmaru in the north to today's Sanjō Street in the south. In short, Nijō Castle was built by reclaiming the northern part of Shinsenen and drawing its spring water into the new design. In its prime, on the northern side of Shinsenen, stood the *Kenrinkaku*, which was flanked east and west by wings and a fishing pavilion (*tsuridono*). A stream drawn from the northeast flowed south of *Kenrinkaku* into a large pond that contained a central island. The arrangement of these elements within Shinsenen is regarded as one of the prototypes for the aristocratic mansions (*shinden-zukuri*), together with their integrated *shinden-zukuri* gardens that became formalised from the mid-Heian period onward. The style of floating an island in the garden pond was, in the late Heian period, handed down into the Pure Land gardens that sought to represent the Western Paradise that was believed to lie toward the west. Although these gardens lie some distance south of Nijō Castle and Shinsenen, the Byōdō-in Garden, founded in 1053 (Uji, Kyoto Prefecture), and the Jōruri-ji Garden, founded in the eleventh century (Kizugawa, Kyoto Prefecture) (Figure 5), are cases in point. What matters is the changes that occurred: first, the direction of primacy shifted from north to west; second, the master of the architecture changed from a human being to Amida Buddha; and, third, the axis of viewing was consequently reversed. In Shinsenen and in *shinden* gardens, one viewed the pond and its island, which spread southward, from buildings situated on the northern side of the site. At Byōdō-in and Jōruri-ji, however, the main hall, whose master is not a human but Amida Buddha, is set on the west, where the focus shifts from looking at the garden from the building to looking at the building from the garden or across the garden pond, and worshipping the Amida Buddha seated within. Even so, the essential elements of the garden are here again, as in Shinsenen and the *shinden-zukuri* gardens: a pond with an island, where the shoreline, like that of the *shinden-zukuri* gardens, is a gentle beach (*suhama*) paved with rounded river stones. The *suhama* is composed of soft, graceful curves, and although its impression contrasts with that of the Sampō-in Garden and the Ninomaru Garden, whose entire waterside is formed of massive revetment stonework, the garden composition, in which



Figure 4. The present-day Shinsenen bears little trace of its former grandeur.



Figure 5. Amida Hall of Jōruri-ji, situated on the western side, viewed from the opposite bank.



Figure 6. Shōkintei teahouse in the Katsura Imperial Villa Garden, viewed across the pond.



Figure 7. Taihei-kaku bridge pavilion in the Shin'en Garden of Heian Shrine, viewed across the pond.

an island floats in a pond and is planted with vegetation, remains.

This composition of the “Gardens of Ponds and Islands” includes multiple stylistic variants, yet its vestiges may be observed in the Katsura Imperial Villa Garden (Nishikyō Ward, Kyoto) (Figure 6), built in the early Edo period by the princely father and son Prince Toshihito (1579-1629) and Prince Toshitada (1619-1662), and in the Shin'en Garden of Heian Shrine (Sakyō Ward, Kyoto) (Figure 7), created as a public work by the Meiji-period gardener Ogawa Jihei (1860-1933).

Gardens of white sand and stones

Another lineage essential to Kyoto’s garden history are the “Gardens of White Sand and Stones”. The *kare-sansui*, which took shape in the mid-Muromachi period, are often called the “Zen garden”. Unlike the gardens introduced thus far, this comparatively recent lineage contains neither ponds nor islands, scarcely any undulating terrain, and few plantings. It is a waterless, level garden, whose surface is spread with white sand upon which stone compositions are set. In this sense, the “Gardens of White

Sand and Stones” differ completely from the “Gardens of Ponds and Islands”. Whereas the latter are expansive gardens endowed with abundant components and a sense of vitality, the former constitute an inorganic, ascetic lineage produced by paring the components down.

During the Heian period, between the *shinden* and the pond to its south, there was a flat stage for ceremonies. Often this space was spread with white sand and called the *Nan-tei* (south garden). Around the same period, it was not uncommon to place stone compositions at the edge of the terrain in *shinden* gardens. In short, it was a localized scene within older gardens, which were rich in compositional elements, that came to be singled out and appreciated as an independent object of viewing in later periods. Hence *kare-sansui*, in its present sense, emerged. The shoin garden of Daisen-in, a sub-temple of Daitoku-ji, is thought to have been laid out in the late Muromachi period (Kita Ward, Kyoto) (Figure 8). In one corner of a plot spread with white sand, this garden builds a low, small, L-shaped artificial hill and, shoring up its edges, sets up so many standing stones that they cover the mound. Against a back-

drop of clipped evergreens, large upright stones stand high and vertical. Between them, slightly lower, bluish stones are placed, and from the foot of these blue stones, a narrow band of white sand is laid down to the expanse of white sand below the mound. Because a stone bridge spans this base of white sand, we believe that the sand is being likened to water. The vertical stones represent precipitous mountains, while the lower blue stones set among those mountains, represent a waterfall, each element expressed in a different material. This miniature garden, which was likely viewed from within the shoin through a rectangular frame defined by the eaves and the garden-side veranda, must have appeared as an unfolding of the landscape paintings imported from China at the same time. Daisen-in also possesses a south garden of the *hōjō*, yet in this garden there is only a modest cone-shaped heap of white sand, and a flat expanse of white sand spreads out. This vacant space is precisely the background space for *kare-sansui* that appears repeatedly around the buildings.

From the garden of Daisen-in, proceed to the nearby Zuihō-in Garden, another sub-temple of Daitoku-ji (Kita Ward, Kyoto) (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Stone composition in Zuihō-in Garden, suggesting rough waves on a sea of white sand.



Figure 8. The Daisen-in Study Garden appears to recreate the landscape of an ink painting.



Figure 10. Rugged rock islets rising from a sea of white sand in the Honbō Garden of Tōfuku-ji.



Figure 11. Konchi-in Garden with Turtle Island on the left, Crane Island on the right, and Mt. Hōrai at the rear.

Designed in 1961 by Shigemori Mirei (1896-1975), who was also a historian of garden art, this garden sets stones from the summit of an artificial hill and a cluster of vertical standing stones in the rear corner, in an arc like a chain of peaks. One line takes the narrow, cape-like form of a tongue that cleaves the garden and extends to a distant rock islet driven into the sand, while the other proceeds from a small promontory to several scattered rock islets.

Aware of the famous kare-sansui at nearby Daisen-in, this garden, though iconographic, appears to miniaturize the actual structure of capes even more than a landscape painting would, and its rough sand ripples clearly evoke the sea. Among Shigemori's kare-sansui, there is also his debut work, the Honbō Garden of Tōfuku-ji (Higashiyama Ward, Kyoto) (Figure 10), in which, within a white-sand space conceived as the sea, he composes islands beginning with Hōrai Island.

If one wishes to see an elaborate composition of sea and islands created with white sand and stones, it may be worthwhile to visit the Konchi-in Garden (Sakyō Ward, Kyoto) (Figure 11), designed in the early Edo period by Kobori Enshū, who remodeled the southern section of the Ninomaru Garden. Built in the south garden of the hōjō to welcome Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604-1651), this kare-sansui, while leaving in the foreground a flat white sand space characteristic of a south garden, constructs, by means of an artificial hill and stone compositions, Turtle Island and Crane Island to left and right, praying for Iemitsu's longevity, with Mt. Hōrai at the back. Particularly conspicuous in this garden, if one were to replace the white sand space of the Konchi-in Garden with water, one would see that its composition closely approximates that of a "Garden of Ponds and Islands" in which stone compositions are set along the edge of a pond. On the way back, stop by Murin-an, a modern garden from the Meiji period, located nearby.



Figure 12. Hōjō Garden at Ryōan-ji, viewed from the northeast corner.

In the Ryōan-ji Temple Garden (Ukyo Ward, Kyoto) (Figure 12), which is thought to have been created between the late Muromachi and early Edo periods, such concrete evocations of natural scenery recede. Enclosed by earthen walls, this perfectly rectangular space is entirely spread with white sand. The only plantings are a mere scattering of moss, and although several viewing stones are set in place, the stones are comparatively small, so that the greater part of the garden is left as a blank white expanse. During the Heian period, stone compositions in *shinden*-style gardens were often placed along the edges of changes in the terrain. Similarly, in the gardens of Daisen-in and Zuihō-in, upright stones are set at the slopes of small artificial hills, yet this garden is virtually flat. Even though there is a slight mound beneath each stone, the stones rise abruptly from the planar white sand, almost entirely unconnected to the topography. Considering that in the natural world stones tend to be exposed where the landform changes, the garden offers no reason why the stones appear where they do. Instead, people delight in their purely abstract, plastic arrangement. The stone groupings lack any rationale and have elicited a multitude of interpretations. Perhaps for this reason, this garden has become influential not only within Japan, but also internationally, making it one of the most notable candidates among the "gardens of white sand and stones" to visit. After viewing this garden, a visit to the nearby Rokuon-ji (Golden Pavilion) is highly recommended.

Throughout this essay, Kyoto has been taken as the field of study, and Japanese gardens have been introduced by dividing them into two broad lineages: "Gardens of Ponds and Islands" and "Gardens of White Sand and Stones." While many other significant gardens and stylistic currents could be cited, setting these two poles provides a useful perspective from which to appreciate the richness and diversity of Kyoto's garden heritage.

These examples, of course, represent only a portion of what the city offers. During your stay in Kyoto in the summer of 2026, should time permit, wander at will and discover its many celebrated gardens for yourself. ●

About the author



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Tomoki Yamauchi is Professor of Aesthetics at Kyoto University of Education and a gardener, Japan. His monograph *When the Garden Takes Form* (2023) documents the creation of the garden at Kannon-ji in Fukuchiyama, Kyoto Prefecture. Yamauchi has also introduced seminal garden literature to Japanese readers through his translations of Gilles Clément's *Le jardin en mouvement* (2015) and Derek Jarman and Howard Sooley's *Derek Jarman's Garden* (2024). In addition to appearing in documentary films on gardens, he organises citizen-engaged fieldwork in Kyoto gardens and delivers public lectures, thus pursuing a broad practice that bridges scholarship, design, and public outreach. E-mail: tomoki2556@gmail.com