

# Uprooted: Gardening and Landscaping During the Japanese-American Internment

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## Abstract

Gardens constitute a nexus between culture and constructed nature. For diaspora communities, they often stand as material reflections of the process of cultural continuity and assimilation. In the case of forced immigrants, such as the incarceration of roughly 120,000 Nikkei (Japanese Americans) during World War II, the degree to which they were able to reconstruct features of the gardens of their homelands is particularly instructive. Using primary sources in public archives, we investigate how interned Nikkei used gardening to endure their incarceration and to recultivate their traditional relationships with nature. For Nikkei internees, gardens provided a wealth of material and psychological benefits. Because the camps were typically at locations largely devoid of vegetation, gardens provided a means to making their forced incarceration in hostile landscapes more habitable. Most importantly, because camp gardens were explicit celebrations of Japanese heritage, they constituted subtle acts of political resistance.

Keywords: gardens, internment camp, sense of place, Nikkei, cultural marker, diaspora

*Uprooted, thrown in a pile, side of the road. But remember, rise again  
and full bloom once again.*

—poem by internee Yoriyuki Kikuchi (CSU Fullerton Oral  
History Collection 1974)

## Introduction

GARDENS CONSTITUTE VITAL physical and psychological connections between people and constructed nature. They have deep historical roots in all sedentary societies, past and present, and they are as varied in form and function as they are in significance to their human creators. For the Aztecs, chinampa floating gardens supplied food for the masses as well as pleasure gardens for elites (Dunmire 2004, 32–46). For ancient

Egyptians, funerary gardens gave Pharaohs the promise of ritually significant plants in the afterlife (Katz 2018). And for colonial Europeans, botanical gardens served to recreate the healing flora of the biblical Garden of Eden (Drayton 2000, 11). Modern gardens continue to serve various individual and community functions, such as aesthetics in rose gardens, health in healing gardens, experiential education in school gardens, and meditation in temple gardens (Thacker 1979; Hartig and Marcus 2006). Among the myriad types and objectives of garden space, home gardens and other family or multifamily efforts are perhaps the most ubiquitous and culturally significant.

Since people first came to occupy permanent dwellings, home gardens have served as readily accessible sources of vegetables and fruits, medicines, and spices, as well as spaces for rest and contemplation (Doolittle 2004). According to Kimber (2004, 267), home gardens are “culturally controlled” biogeographical communities that are “heterogeneous and multilayered, with many shrub and tree species among the herbaceous species, including weeds,” which are often considered useful. They represent vibrant social spaces where horticultural history is constructed and transferred, and where botanical resources contribute to economic livelihoods and nutritional security (Ban and Coomes 2004). They have been crucial sources of vegetables and fruit during global conflicts, termed war gardens early on but later and more patriotically, victory gardens (Young and Young 2010, 744–748). Home gardens are often gendered spaces, with women’s gardens often supplying vegetables and spices for domestic use, whereas men’s gardens often orient toward commercially valuable plants (Reyes-Garcia et al. 2010). They can be rich in crop varieties and genetic diversity (Blancas et al. 2010; Zimmerer and de Haan 2019), and many spontaneous species, especially weeds, serve as both food and medicine (Voeks 2004).

Among diaspora groups, whether migrating from rural to urban landscapes (WinklerPrins and de Souza 2005), or from international destinations, gardens constitute highly visible reflections of the process of cultural continuity and assimilation (Kimber 2004). They are spaces where botanical traditions are maintained and reformulated. A particularly poignant example of immigrants using gardens and gardening to reestablish a sense of place and ethnic space occurred in the Western United States soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 9066, causing the incarceration of roughly 120,000 Nikkei in the interest of “military necessity.” While driven from their homes and into new, oppressive environments, Nikkei managed not only to survive their confinement, but to recreate a biogeographical sense of place within it. Hundreds of gardens and associated landscaping projects were conceived

and lovingly executed in both the temporary assembly centers and the internment camps. In this article, we explore the relationship between nature and immigrant peoples by investigating how interned Nikkei used gardens to endure their incarceration and to recreate elements of their Japanese botanical heritage.

## Methods

We examined primary Japanese internment resources through content and textual analysis of various digital archives. These include the US National Park Service’s *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites*, the DenshoBlog, the Japanese-American collections of the Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (CSU Fullerton), the National Endowment for the Humanities’ *Chronicling America* archive, the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library (UC Berkeley), Washington State University Digital Archives, the Tessa Digital Collections (Los Angeles Public Library), the Hirasaki National Resource Center (Japanese American National Museum), and the Calisphere Collections (University of California). The Densho collection was also consulted for original internment newspaper accounts, especially the *Santa Anita Pacemaker*, the *Manzanar Free Press*, and the *Poston Press Bulletin*, all written and edited by Japanese Americans during their internment.

## Historical Context

In the spring of 1882, the U.S. passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, barring any further passage of Chinese immigrants into the country (Garrison 2015; Hirahara 2000). The resultant surge in demand for non-Chinese immigrant labor, especially by the agricultural and railroad sectors, would coincide with the exodus of enterprising young Japanese men and women leaving their home country in search of greater opportunities (Fukusawa 1974; Hirahara 2000; Garrison 2015). This wave of first-generation Japanese immigrants—known as the Issei—would build new homes and lives in America.

While the Issei varied in educational and professional backgrounds before arriving in the U.S., many found employment in the agricultural and landscaping fields. The World’s Fairs of the late nineteenth century had popularized Japanese gardens as status symbols amongst the wealthy, and Issei were employed in large numbers to care for the lawns and gardens of well-to-do white Americans as early as 1891 (Hirahara 2000). Though some had prior horticultural experience and sought this type of work, others were forced into it due to limited English skills and racist legislation (Hirahara 2000; Helphand 2006). Issei and their American-born children, the Nisei, overwhelmingly worked on farms, orchards, residential gardens, and nurseries, and came to hold an ethnic

monopoly over the gardening and landscaping fields (Tamura 2004, 2012; Garrison 2015). Perhaps for fear of this success, racially charged legislation was passed at the federal and state levels. The 1907–1908 Gentlemen’s Agreement and the Immigration Act of 1924 restricted and then barred Japanese immigration. In addition, a variety of Alien Land Laws prevented Issei from owning, leasing, or sharecropping land. Yet Japanese Americans continued to prosper (Garrison 2015). By 1934, more than one-third of the Nikkei labor force in Los Angeles were employed in gardening or landscaping, and their success seemed likely to continue (Hirahara 2000).

The lives built by the Nikkei were upended, however, by the racial frenzy following the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. The hysteria culminated in President Roosevelt’s signing of Executive Order No. 9066 on February 19, 1942, uprooting Japanese Americans living in “military strategic areas,” primarily along the west coast (Hirahara 2000). Though the order offered flexibility to “self-evacuate” to other parts of the country, many states banned Nikkei from crossing their borders. Japanese-American families were thus forced to participate in the government-led evacuation carried out by the newly founded War Relocation Authority (WRA) (Garrison 2015). Given between six and twenty-one days to settle their affairs and pack only essentials, Nikkei were incarcerated at temporary holding centers for several months, followed by the more-permanent internment camps. Despite the apparent “military necessity” of internment, no evidence arose during the war or after of Nikkei spying on the U.S. for Japan (Tamura 2004).

## Internment Gardens

### Victory Gardens

Victory gardens were heavily promoted by the U.S. government to reduce strain on national resources that might be redirected toward the war. They were marketed as a means of providing patriotic recreation and stress relief, as well as contributing to an Allied victory (Lawson 2014). Garden tenders on the home front were cast as soldiers, and according to one government-distributed handbook, weeds and other garden pests were “miniature Japanazis” to be obliterated without hesitation (USDA 1942, 8). The irony of embracing the victory garden concept did not escape interned Japanese Americans. They were aware that they may well be uprooted again before being able to reap the fruits of their harvest (Helphand 2006, 157). But they were keen to show they could be counted on to do their part in the war effort. And they were eager to improve their diet. Victory gardens were cultivated at the temporary assembly centers at the Fresno County Fairgrounds and Santa Anita Racetrack, as well as

the internment camps at Manzanar, Heart Mountain, Jerome, Minidoka, Poston, and Topaz (Hirahara 2000; Dusselier 2008).

Most of these victory gardens were structured similarly to modern community gardens, with a large plot of land subdivided into sections assigned to individuals or families. Others were of formidable size. Spanning 2,000 acres, Heart Mountain garden headlined in the *Heart Mountain Sentinel* as “West Coast Pioneers Labor on Virgin Soil (*Heart Mountain Sentinel* 8 May 1943, 5). As an internee reported, “One would be amazed to note how a handful of seeds sewn below eaves and between buildings can make a bountiful supply of food, pleasure and satisfaction” (*Poston Press Bulletin* 5 August 1942). The gardens’ popularity was emphasized in the minutes of a meeting of the Heart Mountain Victory Gardeners’ Association, in which they noted receipt of an additional twenty applications for new gardens and were concerned they would run out of suitable land (HMVG 1943). One hundred internees ultimately collaborated on a single victory garden at this camp (Figures 1–2).



Figure 1.—A victory garden at Heart Mountain, 1944 (Hatchimonji Collection, Densho Digital Repository).



Figure 2.—Kumezo Hatchimonji, a leader in the creation of victory gardens at Heart Mountain, stands in one of them, 1943 (Hatchimonji Collection, Densho Digital Repository).

On the one hand, the popularity of internment victory gardens can be attributed to practicality. They supplemented food provided by the WRA mess halls, granting internees a greater volume and variety of produce. By all accounts, the victory gardens tended by internees were highly productive. Heart Mountain's victory gardeners were urged to limit the size of their gardens to restrict the selling of surplus crops (HMVG 1943). Manzanar's officials boasted that their three-acre victory garden produced 3,000 crates of produce in a single month (WRA 1942). The contributions provided by victory garden crops met enthusiasm and gratitude: The *Santa Anita Pacemaker* spent several issues in July 1942 following the progress of the victory gardens, culminating in the harvest of thirty-five crates of napa (Chinese cabbage) and 297 dozen bunches of radishes (Santa Anita Pacemaker 1942a; 1942b; 1942c). The *Manzanar Free Press* reported in June 1942 on its first crop of thirty-five crates of radishes. Some of the crops grown in Manzanar, such as napa and daikon, were especially important for their role in Japanese cuisine—a rare treat within the camps, as the mess halls typically served only Western-style food. A particularly appreciated victory garden product was tsukemono (pickled garden vegetables) (*Manzanar Free Press* 10 September 1943, 14).

### Parks

Parks were the largest of the ornamental gardens created at the camps. These impressive landscaping projects required considerable investment of time and resources. Benefitting the entire camp community, however, they were well worth the effort. While it is known that parks were installed at multiple temporary assembly centers and camps, the best records are of the parks at Manzanar, which provide considerable insight into their variety and complexity.

Merritt Park, located in the fire break between Blocks 23 and 33, is considered the largest garden in any of the internment camps (Burton et al. 2003; Tamura 2012). With the blessing of the WRA, internees Kuichiro Nishi and Francis Miyosaku Uyematsu, both former nurserymen, designed what they originally envisioned as “Rose Park.” When construction began in the fall of 1942, supervised by Tak Muto, a “well known San Fernando floriculturalist,” numerous domestic rosebuds were acquired and had to be grafted to native root stock (*Manzanar Free Press* 5 May 1942). As the project grew in size and complexity, it was renamed “Pleasure Park” and then “Merritt Park,” in honor of Ralph Merritt, the WRA Director of Manzanar (NPSPWR 2006). The park contained more than one hundred species of flowering plants, two lakes, a waterfall, a bridge, a tea house, and numerous pine trees (Figure 3), a testimonial “to the Japanese people’s traditional love of nature” (*Manzanar Free Press* 8 October 1942, 1).



Figure 3.—Pool in Pleasure Park, Manzanar Relocation Center, California. Photograph by Ansel Adams, 1943 (Library of Congress).

Uyematsu was also invested in the creation of Cherry Park, located just south of the orphanage known as “Children’s Village” (Figure 4). With special permission from the WRA, Uyematsu returned to his personal business, Star Nursery, and collected more than one thousand plants, which he donated to the park (WRA 1942). This included some five hundred cherry trees, twenty wisteria vines, and an assortment of camellias and other plants (Burton et al. 2003).



Figure 4.—Harry Matsumoto, superintendent of Children’s Village, sits with his charges at what is most likely Cherry Park, 1942 (CSU Japanese-American Digitization Project). Figure 4: Harry Matsumoto, superintendent of Children’s Village, sits with his charges at what is most likely Cherry Park, 1942 (CSU Japanese-American Digitization Project).

### Mess Hall Gardens

“Mess hall gardens” or “block gardens,” as implied in the name, sat adjacent to the mess halls in many blocks of the camps. The concept was pioneered by Harry Ueno early in his incarceration at Manzanar. While waiting in line for food at a neighboring mess hall, Ueno recognized the unpleasant conditions—scorching sun and constant dust—and decided change was necessary:

And so I talked to one of, friend of mine working in the mess hall, said, “How about we dig the big pond there? We get plenty of water in here and maybe they’ll avoid the dust kick up from the ground, and put the water in. That’ll cool off, little bit, and put lot of rock around. And they could sit on there, and wait ‘til the mess hall’s open.” They ring the bell but they have to stand on line, see. So that make it much easier for people to wait for. (Ueno 1994)

Shortly after construction began next to the Block 22 mess hall, former nurseryman Akira Nishi—brother to Kuichiro Nishi, who had worked on Merritt Park—joined the project to lend his expertise in pond building. In its final form, the Block 22 mess hall garden featured an eighty-foot pond, a wishing well, and numerous live carp (Figure 5). Ueno and Nishi dubbed the park “Otowanotaki” after a pond in Kyoto, Japan (Ueno 1994).



Figure 5.—The wishing well and pond at Block 22’s mess hall garden can be seen, 1942 (Jack Iwata Collection, Japanese American National Museum).

Other blocks rushed to replicate the beauty and the cooling properties of the Otowanotaki. When the *Manzanar Free Press* held a contest for the best block garden, the Block 34 mess hall garden took first place, boasting “generous green slopes and dip, fish pond and different greenery” (*Manzanar Free Press* 5 November 5 1942, 2). Even if the gardens did not reach the grandeur of Otowanotaki, it is undeniable they provided a transformative force. While Nikkei were forced to converge on the mess halls, the gardens created a more beautiful and pleasant gathering place for both meals and community events. Many adhered to the Momoyama style, popularized in sixteenth-century Japan, following a north-south axis

with elements arranged as energy, direction, color, and numbers (NPSPWR 2006, 132).

### Entryway Gardens

As opposed to parks and mess hall gardens, both of which were created for the enjoyment of the wider Nikkei community in the camps, personal entryway gardens were made for the pleasure of the gardener and their family. Some of the most spectacular floral displays were housed within entryway gardens. At Manzanar, the first entryway garden was created in

June 1942 by William Katsuki, a former landscaper from Bel Air (Figure 6). This feat was particularly noteworthy because the first internees had arrived only four months earlier. Recruiting the assistance of neighbors, friends, and the WRA, Katsuki constructed a lavish garden that boasted four lakes, multiple bridges, nine Joshua trees, and a rock garden (*Manzanar Free Press* 30 June 1942, 4).



Figure 6.—William Katsuki works in his Manzanar garden with materials salvaged from the desert landscape. Photo by Dorothea Lange, 1942 (*Densho Digital Repository*).

The personal garden of Yasusuke Kogita, located in Minidoka’s Block 5, may be the most famous of the entryway gardens. Kogita’s garden included an impressive array of willows, bonsai sagebrush, native aquatic plants, and a variety of annual and perennial flowers, artistically arranged around two ponds (Tremayne and Shallat 2013) (Figure 7). The most impressive feature, however, was a one-ton lava tube known as “Stove-Pipe Rock.” It took Kogita a week

to pry free the lava tube from its bed and required the help of his two preteen sons to haul it back from the sage lands in a handcart (Eaton 1952). When the camp closed in 1945, he hired trucks to haul all the rocks and most of the plants to Seattle, where he reinstalled the garden in front of a hotel he purchased. The garden has since been moved, currently existing in the front yard of his son, Paul Kogita (Tamura 2004).



Figure 7.—Yasusuke Kogita, second from the left, stands in the garden he created, 1944 (*Densho Digital Repository*).

## Garden Materials

Given the overall strain on resources during wartime, not to mention the constraints of living in an internment camp, ascertaining necessary materials for camp gardens represented a considerable challenge. This was a point of contention at the time for citizens living near the camps. Internment gardens were viewed as “luxuries” offered to “enemy aliens.” Why were internees receiving special treatment, while the average American citizen was subject to rationing? Why should the taxpayer provide something as frivolous as flowers to “the enemy”?

The answer is that Nikkei internees by and large were not being “provided” with gardens by the government. Internees were highly self-reliant when sourcing materials for their gardening and landscaping projects. Some internees may have planned for the eventuality and brought supplies with them during the evacuation process. Because the incarceration occurred during the spring of 1942, around the beginning of planting season, some Nikkei employed in horticultural businesses seized the opportunity to bring seeds and young plants to the camps, often stored in tins and cookware (Hosokawa 1942). Other materials would have been purchased from local nurseries and hardware stores. Gardeners such as Kogita utilized Sears-Roebuck catalogues to acquire a greater variety of seeds. Plants would also be mailed in by friends and acquaintances outside the camps. This was true of the Quaker American Friends Service Committee, who early on provided flower seeds to the internees (Eaton 1952, 32).

Primarily, however, there was an emphasis on salvaged materials, utilizing whatever could be acquired from the landscape or spared from WRA construction projects. Pine, cottonwood, Joshua tree, and willow trees were acquired from the local area, as were species of cactus, reed, mint, spurge, goosefoot, sunflower, sagebrush, and cattails (Hosokawa 1942). When searching for plants to furnish gardens, not even weeds were overlooked. Kogita was proud of the wild sunflower that dominated his garden, introduced, he noted, “by some bird” (cited in Eaton 1952, 92). Remembering her mother’s arrival at the Puyallup Assembly Center in Washington, Monica Itoi Sone said,

Dandelions were already pushing their way up through the cracks [in the cement]. Mother was delighted when she saw their shaggy yellow heads. “Don’t let anyone pick them. I’m going to cultivate them.” (Sone 1953, 517)

Regardless of how humble an individual plant may have seemed, it was prized and carefully tended. Internees also scouted the local desert, mountains, or sagebrush habitats for rocks and other interesting mineral

features, such as Kogita’s Stove-Pipe Rock (Eaton 1952). Irrigation water was recycled from the laundry buildings, and cement from ponds was salvaged from dust where a pile of sacks had leaked—and occasionally stolen from other WRA projects (Hosokawa 1942; Eaton 1952; Ueno 1994). And to adorn the lakes, fish, mussels, and frogs were captured from nearby irrigation canals (Hosokawa 1942).

## Plant Species

Using camp internee accounts, other contemporary reports, and the findings of later researchers, we identified 100 types of plants that were cultivated in the camp gardens. These may have included many more botanical species, as several were referenced simply by their generic name, such as “mint,” “cactus,” or “willow.” Roughly half were cultivated for food, while forty-five percent were grown as ornamentals, and five percent were herbs and spices (Figure 8). Most were common garden cultivars, the kind typically found in Western home gardens such as broccoli, onions, cabbage, and peas. Some may have been cultivated for their medicinal value, such as lavender and verbena. There were, however, several food plants of East Asian origin, including azuki (red mung bean), daikon (Japanese radish), gobo (burdock), napa (Chinese cabbage), and shungiku (edible chrysanthemum). The ornamental plants were mostly common garden cultivars, many sourced from the surrounding deserts and riparian corridors. However, several had particular significance for Japanese people and their diaspora, especially chrysanthemum, cherry trees, camellias, Chinese elm, daffodils, dogwood, gladiolus, pines, and wisteria.

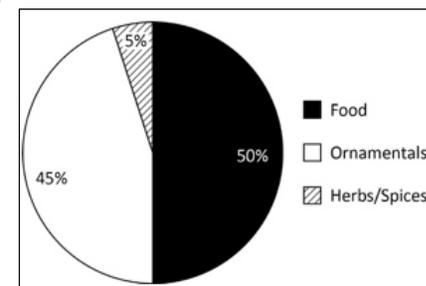


Figure 8.—Plant uses for 100 cultivated plants grown in internment gardens.

The life forms found in internee gardens were mostly what might be expected. About three-quarters of the plants were herbaceous, another eight percent shrubs. But the large portion of trees (eighteen percent) is surprising, given the long life of most trees and the limited time that internees were incarcerated (Figure 9). Many were fruit trees, such as apple and pear varieties, but others were planted for aesthetic improvement, such as birch, cedar, cottonwood, Joshua tree, and willow.

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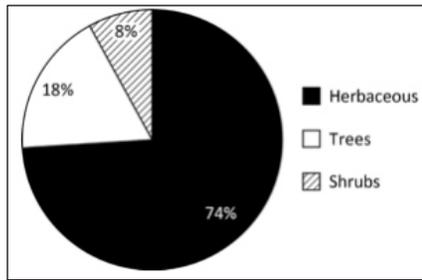


Figure 9.—Lifeforms of 100 cultivated plants grown in internment gardens.

## Discussion

Gardens are embedded in the cultural fabric of sedentary societies. They supply a host of benefits—material and spiritual—for garden tenders and their family and friends. For immigrants confronted by cultural, social, and physical challenges, gardens often constitute a crucial element in maintaining traditional relations with constructed nature, creating a

nostalgic and meaningful sense of place in their adopted landscapes. Studies among California diaspora have explored the supportive role of garden spaces in maintaining traditions of their homelands. Indian immigrants in Southern California, for example, recreate aspects of Hindu religious spaces by cultivating spiritually significant trees and shrubs (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2008). Recently arrived and elderly Hmong in Sacramento cultivate traditional vegetables and herbs in home gardens to foster a sense of personal value in an otherwise alienating urban setting (Corlett, Dean, and Grivetti 2003). Herbs and spices, which play a central role in Indian cooking and Ayurvedic medicine, are often cultivated in home gardens of Indian immigrants in Southern California (Joseph and Voeks 2020). In Irvine, the ethnic identities of residents are intertwined with the composition of edible and medicinal plant species in their gardens, many associated with their homelands (Stavropoulos 2012). And the home gardens of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles and Riverside are reservoirs of unique maize varieties growing beyond their centers of diversity (Heraty and Ellstrand 2016).

The internment of Japanese Americans represents a compelling example of immigrants using gardens to rekindle a sense of place in an alien and hostile landscape. The hardships and obstacles encountered were legion, yet they were motivated to create islands of green in the arid and semi-arid landscapes of the western U.S. Reflecting on her arrival at Topaz internment camp when just a twenty-one-year-old recent graduate of UC Berkeley, Yoshiko Uchida stated, “All vegetation stopped. There were no trees or grass or growth of any kind, only clumps of dry skeletal greasewood...as bare as a bleached bone” (Uchida 1982, 107). Uchida’s reaction was typical. Across the concentration camps, Nikkei were shocked specifically by the lack of plant life (Helphand 2006). Equally enlightening was commentary in a report for the WRA Community Analysis Section: “Minidoka was desiccated, drab and dusty. But life is not worth living for these people unless they have some green to cultivate”

(Hosokawa 1942). Thus, on a basic level, gardens were created to help make the camps livable. Indeed, one factor the WRA considered when siting an internment camp was the land’s potential for agricultural development.

The skills possessed by many Japanese immigrants in horticulture and landscaping were widely recognized. Government agents reasoned that improvements made by the internees would yield benefits to the nation when the war ended (Helphand 2006). At the Amache camp, for example, elementary school children developed and implemented a landscaping plan to address the frequent dust storms. With the help of adults, 700 students gathered limestone to create walking paths through the camp and planted green rye, flowering cactus, wildflowers, and yucca to reduce wind erosion and dust in this otherwise “desolate looking scene” (Dumas and Walther 1944, 41). As noted by Clark and Shew (2020, 12), internees not only modified Amache’s desolate landscape, they “radically transformed it.”

Gardening also was a means for improving physical and mental health at the camps. According to internees, the fresh vegetables produced by victory gardens enhanced nutrition among the Nikkei. Reflecting on her experience at Santa Anita temporary assembly centers, former internee Florence Nakamura reported that food provided by the WRA was typically of poor quality and unvaried, but meals improved substantially once victory gardeners began yielding produce (Nakamura 2001, 42). Nikkei internees attributed further benefits to both the physical act of gardening and being surrounded by nature. For example, at a meeting of victory gardeners, a man identified as Mr. Terui attested, “When I came here [to Heart Mountain], I was suffering from an indigestion. Now I feel fine after 3 or 4 months spent digging every evening in the victory garden” (HMVG 1943). Indeed, studies suggest that fostering connections with nature—such as cultivating a garden—can boost health and aid in recovering from surgery (Hartig and Marcus 2006; Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2012). Nikkei internees likely recognized these healing features, as evidenced by the creation of a garden complex adjacent to Manzanar’s hospital in 1943 by Zintaro Ogami and Ryozo Kado (Figure 7). This complex included a variety of transplanted trees, rock gardens, a stream and pond, and benches so patients could rest while immersing themselves in nature.

More profound were the effects gardens had on the mental and emotional health of internees. The internment experience—accused of being traitors to their country, then uprooted from their homes and imprisoned in temporary relocation centers unfit for human habitation—was

traumatizing for the Nikkei. Arrival at the permanent camps was marginally better, leaving impressions that ranged from “discouraging” and “dreary” to “shocking” and “staggering” (Helphand 2006). Even the camp administrator at Minidoka acknowledged in his personal diary that “this dull dreary experience in a desert region surely must give these people a feeling of helplessness, hopelessness, and despair which we on the outside do not and will not ever fully understand” (Kleinkopf 1942, 3).

Internees were especially concerned about the mental health of their children. Shoji Nagumo, former head of the League of Southern California Japanese-American Gardeners, stated, “When I thought about children being raised in the desert without grass or trees, I was sure they would become human beings who could not feel joy or pleasure in anything. They might even grow up not understanding the beauty of nature” (quoted in Hirahara 2000, 55). While incarcerated, Nagumo became the driving force behind the planting of poplar trees at Heart Mountain and established a highly successful community victory garden. An camp superintendent reported that young girls, seeing flowers in his office, “fairly fell upon their knees and worshipped the flowers” (Kleinkopf 1942, 3).

Japanese symbols were deliberately integrated into these garden landscapes, both as a source of cultural pride and as moral support for the internees. Motifs harkening turtles—symbols of endurance in Japanese culture—were integrated into internee gardens through the use of boulders that resembled the reptile (Dusselier 2008; Chiang 2018). Many gardens with ponds contained live fish, including one with more than sixty large carp, and some were stocked with turtles (*Manzanar Free Press* 28 September 1942, 2). According to internee Yataro Okuno, the carp is “an emblem of an undaunted spirit to get over any hardship which may come in front of you” (1942, 18).

In an environment where overt political statements could threaten one’s safety, gardening and landscaping projects in the camps served as a way for the Nikkei to express their opinions on the war and their confinement. On the one hand, the act of gardening signaled loyalty to the U.S. and a willingness to follow the authority of the WRA. Landscaping and gardening projects improved the public lands that the camps were located on, thus serving the American taxpaying public. And allowing internees to have gardens made the WRA’s treatment of the Nikkei appear more humane to outside observers (Tamura 2004; Helphand 2006). Gardens also suggested to the WRA that their “Americanization” campaign was working, making camps look more like

“an ordinary American city” and signaling that internees were becoming more like ordinary Americans rather than enemy aliens (Chiang 2018). Indeed, some gardens overtly displayed American patriotism. The garden at the entrance to Minidoka, for example, featured boulders arranged in the shape of an eagle and an Honor Roll board that listed the names of 1,000 internees who had enrolled in the U.S. military (Tamura 2004). The patriotic garden was designed by Fujitaro Kubota, who in later years would become a famed gardener and winner of Japan’s “Order of the Sacred Treasure” for fostering respect for Japanese gardening. The internees at Minidoka perhaps hoped that the garden would serve as an ambassador speaking to visitors on behalf of the Nikkei.

In more cases, however, internment garden and landscaping efforts should be viewed as acts of resistance. The sheer act of gardening—claiming a space designated for a specific purpose, modifying it, and thereby taking ownership—is an assertion of agency and inherently a political act. As Helphand (2006, 198) notes, internment gardens represented “the anticamp, where acts of cultural identity could be construed as subversive to those in power.” Gardens were often situated in vacant areas between buildings, designated as firebreaks by the WRA. Though seemingly subtle, by choosing to place their gardens in the firebreaks, internees were displaying disrespect for WRA authority. Moreover, the inclusion of fences in entryway gardens helped the Nikkei reclaim some privacy and power (Garrison 2015).

Inasmuch as resources allowed, camp gardeners employed traditional Japanese gardening techniques and aesthetics. Whereas Western gardening aesthetics typically focus on symmetry and order, traditional Japanese gardens aim to recreate “nature in miniature.” Using the natural world as inspiration, Japanese landscaping tends to be asymmetrical and flowing, encouraging viewers to walk slowly and meditate on their surroundings (Morse 1961; Tamura 2004; Tremayne and Shallat 2013; Garrison 2015; Chiang 2018). The WRA interpreted widespread implementation of gardens as signs of the Americanization of internees, but the opposite was the case: Nikkei rejected Western landscaping techniques and embraced traditional Japanese gardening styles as celebration and pride in their heritage, even while being punished for their ethnicity. Internment gardens were Japanese, celebrating Japanese heritage, as the administrative gardens reflected the rigidity of the U.S. government.

Internees were aware of the political implications of these aesthetics. Criticizing a garden built in a racetrack at the Tanforan Assembly Center, internee Charles Kikuchi in 1942 wrote in his diary that the

whole thing looks like old Japan. Some people just can't divorce themselves from Japan and cling to the old traditions and ways. The garden is an outward indication of this sentiment for Japan. The odds are that the builder of the garden is pro-Japan, although he may have built it for cultural reasons. (1973, 132)

As Kikuchi acknowledges, political statements may not have been the primary motivation for building any particular garden, but the use of Japanese aesthetics inherently conveyed a commentary on the war.

### Cultural Continuity

Japanese culture has long been characterized by a deep and abiding appreciation of nature; not wild nature necessarily, according to Kalland (2014), but rather a tamed and controlled nature, manifested in their gardens. Archaeological evidence suggests that gardens have been a part of Japanese culture for several thousand years, and the art of gardens and gardening has been codified in Japan for at least one thousand years. While home gardens serve basic needs, including the provision of healthful herbs and spices, vegetables, and shade, the development of a garden aesthetic is a deeply engrained Japanese tradition (Goto and Naka 2016; Thacker 1979). Specific elements found in Japanese gardens—flowers, trees, rocks, steppingstones, teahouses, and waterfalls—carry profound symbolic meaning. Over the centuries, new garden techniques merged with earlier traditions, but many of the earliest motifs and symbols have been retained. Thus, the placement of symbolic islands, turtles, carp, and cranes, all present at Manzanar and other camps, as well as the specific arrangement of steppingstones, reveals the replication of age-old Japanese garden traditions in the internment camps (Beckwith 2013). Other camps, such as Poston in Arizona, similarly combined water and rock and plant life, but with less attention to replication of Japanese motifs, and more attention to meeting the needs of internee children (Eaton 1952, 74).

Flowering plants have been a Japanese preoccupation for many centuries. The art of Japanese flower arrangement (ikebana) is at least one thousand years old, and flower viewing is a national pastime. During hanami festivals, for example, groups gather in pleasure gardens and parks to appreciate cherry blossoms, which are associated with Japan's early monarchs. The country's earliest poetry often meditates on "the fleeting beauty of the cherry blossom" (Thacker 1979, 63), long symbolizing "the beauty of a brief life well lived" (McClellan 2005, 10), embraced by samurai as well as WWII Japanese kamikaze pilots as symbols of a short but meaningful existence.

Cherry trees are probably the most visible Japanese landscape elements in the Americas, which can be traced to the 1912 gifting of 6,000 cherry trees by Japan to the United States. Half were planted in Washington, D.C., and half in New York's Central Park (Pooler 2011). Their ubiquity in the internment gardens testifies to a continuation of Japanese botanical traditions, as well as the fruitful relationship that existed between Japan and the U.S. before WWII. They are at once parallel signs of cultural resistance and of assimilation.

Complementing the ornamental plants that adorned internment gardens, many with ancient Japanese symbolism and meaning, were the many edible plants. Several were Japanese cultural markers, such as napa, daikon, gobo, and azuki, that encouraged culinary connections with homeland. Food is a fundamental medium for the expression of cultural identity and collective belonging (Narayan 1995). Traditional foods not only create a sense of community, but also establish a sense of otherness, in this case an apartness from their American oppressors (Fischler 2011). Cultivating traditional vegetables in internment gardens may seem a relatively benign activity, but in many ways, it was silent rebellion.

Most plants cultivated in internment gardens were annuals and herbaceous, characterizing most vegetables, grains, and tubers. However, the interned Nikkei also cultivated scores of trees. Some, such as willows and cottonwoods, served as shade or pond ornamentation. Others, such as pines, cherry trees, and Chinese elms, represented cultural connections to ancient Japanese symbols and festivals. Still others, such as apples, pears, and elderberries, were cultivated for food. But the cultivation of long-lived perennials by people who did not anticipate being held captive in these hostile landscapes for long raises questions: Why introduce trees they would not see grow into adulthood? Were the Nikkei in fact expecting long internment? Was their love of certain trees so deep that even one or two years of shared existence was sufficient to justify the effort? Or did internees somehow hope that the trees would be loved and cared for long after their departure? Thomas Fuller, an Englishman writing in the eighteenth century, perhaps offers some explanation: "He that plants trees, loves others beside himself" (1732, 91). Indeed, trees planted by interned Nikkei still survive at the remains of Amache and Manzanar.

### Conclusion

The Japanese who immigrated to the United States in the early twentieth century found success in agriculture and horticulture. They came from a homeland in which gardens and their various elements—trees, flowers, rocks, and water—were deeply symbolic of longstanding relations with

constructed nature. Interned in camps throughout the U.S. West during the Second World War, the Nikkei survived in part by recreating traditional relations with cultivated nature. Gardening and landscaping allowed time-honored relationships with the natural world to be reestablished in a new and hostile landscape. For the internees, gardens and parks provided material and psychological benefits. And because camp gardens were celebrations of Japanese heritage, they constituted subtle acts of political resistance. By reclaiming and transforming land, the Nikkei built spaces of healing and self-expression within the camps.

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