



## Dish Gardens : A Little Bit of Land

*the old is now new...*

If you've tried terrariums, but aren't ready to battle with bonsai, consider dipping into a dish garden! Also called *Hachi-Niwa* – “bowl garden” in Japanese – these are lilliputian landscapes which make a perfect obsession for grey wintry days when you are longing for your backyard underneath the muck and snow! Unlike bonsai culture, which uses pruning and shaping techniques to manipulate a woody plant over a long period of time, a dish garden is made by arranging small, slow-growing plants to mimic a fully-formed garden or landscape.

*hachi-niwa*

Americans became fascinated with all things Japanese after the opening of the Japanese exhibit and pavilion at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. A “minor mania” in dish gardens was a part of this trend, as travelers brought home these tiny landscapes from Japan – or had them made once they returned. Japanese landscape gardeners were accustomed to providing dish gardens as scale models of their proposed garden plans for their wealthy clients. This 1932 print by the Art Deco artist Louis Icart from the French magazine *L'Illustration* is a lovely example of how chic they had become. A contemporary article found in *House Beautiful* suggested making an American version which would imitate “some beloved scene of our native landscape” just in case a picture of a Japanese landscape was not available!



*enough history – let's make one now!*

A dish garden is defined by its container, which is similar to most bonsai dishes in that it is only several inches deep but can range in diameter from 6”-24” in a variety of shapes. Unlike bonsai, containers for dish gardens do not have drainage holes. Preparation and planting is therefore the same as for making a terrarium (see directions on the other side). A 1908 book on Japanese gardens was pragmatic: choose your dish and plan your landscape to fit *OR* design a landscape and look for a dish! The most common precept found in the historical information is the importance of keeping a sense of proportion between the plants and the landscape features represented. Thoughtful planning as you gather your elements will make a big difference. Whether you are hoping to imitate a Japanese print or inventing a landscape from your own fantasy just remember that even one feature out of scale will ruin the illusion. Here are three design options for your dish garden – starting with the simplest: **ENGLISH DISH GARDEN:** These are gardens, usually in colorful or fanciful containers, that use the dwarf versions of flowering plants such as African violets, begonias, Christmas cactus, cyclamen, kalanchoe, poinsettia and mini-orchids. Group one or two of these with dwarf ferns and woodland greenery such as creeping ficus, small-leaved ivy or vinca, surround with sheet moss and three or five pretty stones – you are finished! Color-coordination in a pleasing arrangement is the focus of these gardens. **INDOOR FAIRY GARDEN:** For purists, an outdoor fairy garden is always made with natural elements found in the park, woods, or seashore. Indoor fairy gardens, however, are often crafted with miniature furniture and accessories – think dollhouse size – to make a representation of the *real* houses which fairies live in outdoors! With this scale in mind, place your furniture under a tree-shaped specimen such as goldfish plant, false aralia, maple-leaf begonia or parlor palm, then add dwarf ferns, mini-carex, mondo grass, pilea and peperomia for shrubs. Irish moss makes a great fairy carpet and tillandsias will add an exotic touch.

TRADITIONAL JAPANESE DISH GARDEN: Common elements found in Japanese dish gardens include: a mountain, cliff, or hill; a pool of water with an island and a pebbly beach; a waterfall or a stream with a bridge; paths, a gateway, and a house; trees and shrubbery carefully interspersed with boulders; and people! Find interesting rocks to create rugged mountains or make hills by mounding your soil underneath and around plant root balls. You may need to use netting to hold the mounded soil in place, covering it with sheet moss or creeping plants. Sand or gravel was traditionally used to represent water features though mirrors or other shiny materials could also be used. Miniature conifers, ficus, natal plum, pieris, serissa and other bonsai selections are the perfect specimen plants for these gardens. Model train supply stores are a great place to look for structures and adornments as the tiny inhabitants of these dishes will be about 1" tall!

### *dish gardens step by step :*

- **Choose your dish:** Clear glass is the easiest choice because it will tend to disappear and put the visual focus on the little landscape. Decorative trays, porcelain platters, or glazed pottery dishes should be carefully chosen to complement your theme, accessories and plant colors. Test wood, metal and unglazed pottery dishes to make sure they are water-tight.
- **Gather your materials:**
  - Pebbles, Gravel or Soil Perfector
  - Charcoal
  - Coffee Filter
  - Cactus Potting Mix
  - Plants
  - Sheet moss, more pebbles, bark or other soil topper
  - Landscape elements or decorative accessories
  - Turkey baster, mister, small scissors
- **Arrange your design:** Arrange your plants, landscape elements, and adornments outside of your dish. Experiment until you are sure you like the arrangement, looking at it from all angles.
- **Prepare the dish:** If your dish is clear glass, line the bottom and sides of the dish with sheet moss before starting the soil building process. Keep a small section open for a peephole to monitor the water level. If you are using a very shallow, opaque container, place the moss just around the rim so that you'll be able to fold it up over the edges of your landscape.
- **Layer your base materials:** Place rinsed gravel and/or pebbles on the bottom of the container. Next, cover the gravel with a layer of rinsed charcoal. Place a large coffee filter over this surface to prevent soil from washing into the drainage area below. Necessary quantities of each material will vary, depending on the size of your dish.
- **Add the soil:** Use a high-quality cactus potting mix, slightly moistened. The depth of this layer should be appropriate for the size and scale of the container and the root ball size of your chosen plants. Tamp and smooth the soil surface.
- **Add plants, landscape elements, and adornments:** Remove the plants from their pots and knock off extra soil, loosening roots and trimming if needed. Starting with the largest or tallest items, add all the elements of your design. Tamp down the soil firmly around and between the plants. Lightly water-in the plants with the turkey baster. Finish by adding the sheet moss or other soil topper and placing the landscape elements or decorative accessories.

### *maintenance :*

- Water sparingly as you would a traditional terrarium, since the gravel reservoir is not very deep. Because dish gardens are not enclosed, however, monitor water needs closely at the beginning, especially if it is placed in brighter light.
- Light needs will also vary with plants chosen. Remember to rotate your dish garden regularly and move into more light if needed. Supplementing with LED or other plant lights is also an option.
- Fertilizing should be minimal, except for flowering plants. As the dish garden ages it will be more critical to fertilize.
- Tend your dish garden as you would a full-size garden: remove old, dead leaves, trim up straggling plants, mist occasionally with a little dilute fertilizer, and wipe down accessories and the dish itself. Rotate out/replace the seasonal or flowering plants to keep your landscape looking fresh.

### *a few interesting websites:*

History of dish gardens: <http://gardenhistorygirl.blogspot.com/2009/06/japanese-dish-gardens.html>

Japanese dish gardens: <https://www.nal.usda.gov/exhibits/speccoll/exhibits/show/rare-books/tokaido-gojusan-eki-hachiyama->

Fairies & their houses: <https://www.fairyhouses.com/about-fairy-houses/how-to-build/> , <http://www.flowerfairies.com/meet-the-fairies/>