



## Dish Gardens : A Little Bit of Land

Americans became fascinated with all things Japanese after the opening of the Japanese exhibit and pavilion at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Around that time, Japanese landscape gardeners were accustomed to providing *Hachi-Niwa* (bowl gardens) as scale models of their proposed garden plans for their wealthy clients. A “minor mania” in dish gardens began as travelers brought home these lilliputian landscapes – or had them made once they returned. 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! 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.



Le Jardin Japonais – Louis Icart  
L'illustration, 1932

### Variations on History

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, however, containers for dish gardens do not have drainage holes. Preparation is therefore the same as for making a terrarium (see next page). 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, even one feature *out* of scale will ruin the illusion. Here are three design options, 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 with the decorative dish or platter and delicate blooms in a pleasing arrangement are at the heart 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 or selaginella makes a great fairy carpet and tillandsias will add an exotic touch.

**Traditional Japanese Hachi-Niwa:** 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 must 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, start the moss just below the rim and fold it up over the soil to define the landscape.
- *Layer your base materials:* Place rinsed gravel or *Soil Perfector* 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 size of the plants’ root-ball. Tamp and smooth the soil surface.
- *Add plants, landscape elements, and adornments:* Start with the largest plants and work from the center outward. Gently remove the plants from their pots and knock off extra soil. Loosen roots and flatten them into a horizontal “pancake,” trimming if needed. Tamp the soil firmly around and between the plants. Once all the plants are in, add more sheet moss or other soil topper and place the landscape elements or decorative accessories.

## Maintenance

- Water sparingly as you would a traditional terrarium, since the gravel reservoir is not very deep. Use the turkey baster to direct water to the roots. Watering will be more frequent than for terrariums since dish gardens are not enclosed.
- Light needs will vary with plants chosen. Experiment until you find the right spot. Rotate your dish garden regularly.
- Fertilizing should be minimal, except for flowering plants. As the dish garden ages it will be more critical to fertilize.
- Occasional trimming and cleaning (and sometimes replacing) will keep plants healthy and the landscape picturesque.

## For More Information:

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/>