

25 Zen Garden Ideas for a Serene Outdoor Experience



By: [Lynn Coulter](#)

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Discover how to create a peaceful Zen Garden in any space with ideas from top Japanese gardens in the U.S.



Photo: Chicago Botanic Garden/Robin Carlson

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Find Ideas and Inspiration for a Serene Japanese Zen Garden

Could you use some balance and serenity in your life? A Japanese Zen garden can make your backyard--or any space-- feel peaceful and calm.

History and Cultural Significance

Zen gardens originated in Japan centuries ago, after Zen Buddhism was introduced from China. But the term "Zen garden" wasn't used until the 1930s, says Steven Pitsenbarger, Garden Supervisor at San Francisco's [Japanese Tea Garden](#) at the Gardens of Golden Gate Park. Initially, the term referred to dry landscape gardens, or *karesansui*, made with sand and stones. It's changed over time, he explains, to become a "catch-all" associated with meditation. Sometimes it's used to describe other types of Japanese gardens as well as Japanese Zen gardens with untraditional features.

Today's Japanese Zen gardens aren't always associated with Zen Buddhism, Steven adds, but their purpose is the same: they're intended to connect people to nature and help refresh, relax and restore them. "If the garden designer and the gardener have done their best work, then garden visitors will have these experiences with or without the influence of Zen."

Key Principles of Zen Garden Design

Traditional Zen gardens are guided by the concepts of simplicity (*Kanso*), austerity (*Koko*), stillness (*Seijaku*), asymmetry (*Fukinsei*), naturalness (*Shinzen*), mystery or subtlety (*Yugen*) and the magical or unconventional (*Datsuzoku*).

The Benefits of Having a Zen Garden

One of the benefits of having a Zen garden is that its simplicity helps you focus inward, says Hugo Torii, Garden Curator and Director of the Japanese Garden Training Center at the [Portland Japanese Garden](#). The routines of caring for it, such as raking, can encourage contemplation and meditation. "For some, such those who practice Zen Buddhism, it might bring spiritual comfort."

Essential Elements of a Zen Garden

Authentic Zen gardens use stones, rocks, gravel and sand in white or muted grays, browns, blacks and greens. Raked patterns symbolize water, like waves and currents. Misty Frye, Administrator at [Sholom Park](#), a botanical garden in Florida with a Japanese Zen garden, says, "This minimalistic, dry landscape design is meant to inspire reflection through simplicity."

Types of Rocks and Stones to Use

Hugo suggests visiting a local landscaping supply store to see what kinds of stones are available for your Japanese Zen garden. "Choose materials that provide proportion, balance and flow, with appropriate color, texture and form. The most important element of this kind of private space is how it makes you

feel. If it provides comfort to you, that is a success." Don't take stones from natural areas or wildlands, without permission from its governing agency.

Choosing the Right Plants for Tranquility

Raked gardens don't usually have plantings, Hugo says, aside from incidentals like moss. "You do not need to necessarily buy plants that are Japanese in origin." Portland's garden uses many native species, like local ferns. If plants are used, Misty adds, "they're usually chosen for simplicity, subtle color and seasonal beauty rather than bright flowers." She recommends mosses, ferns, evergreens like pines and junipers, bamboo, maple trees, azaleas, camellias, topiaries and native or imported grasses.

Incorporating Water Features for Serenity

Traditional Zen gardens omit water features, but "If you're creating a Zen-inspired garden at home, you can absolutely adapt it to your taste," Misty says. A fountain, pond, pool or other water feature "will change it from a traditional Zen garden to a more of a Japanese-style garden, but it can still capture the same peaceful, meditative feeling."

Maintenance Tips for Zen Gardens

You'll want to keep your Zen garden clean, and rake as needed when the patterns are altered or erased by wind, rain, wildlife or pets. "The majority of a gardener's time is spent picking up leaves, removing weeds, and keeping the lines sharp," Steven says, and you may need to prune any plants. Misty recommends gently brushing moss and periodically washing the algae and dirt off rocks. "There is no harm in regularly raking," Hugo says, "especially if it provides comfort."

Zen Garden Ideas for Small Spaces

"Avoid overcrowding with too many plants or ornaments; let negative space be part of the design," Misty says. "Pick one focal point, like a single rock arrangement or small maple tree." Go vertical with a screen, trellis or hanging planter, and choose dwarf or compact plants. Declutter your surroundings; "The calm effect works best when the area around your Zen garden is also simple and tidy." Save some space in case you want to expand your garden later.

Zen Garden Ideas on a Budget

Take advantage of your landscape's natural features. Use inexpensive play sand, pea gravel, or crushed stone rather than specialty materials, Misty says. She also recommends buying small plants and letting them grow and building your own simple bench or fence. Start with the necessities and add on as your budget allows; you may need rakes and other tools. You can also make a miniature Zen garden for a tabletop or balcony with a container filled with sand, pebbles and

miniature plants. Says Hugo, "The most important element of this kind of private space is how it makes you feel. If it provides comfort to you, that is a success."

Browse our gallery of Zen garden ideas to find many ways to create a peaceful haven in your own backyard.



Photo: Sholom Park

2 / 26

Tell a Story With Your Zen Garden

Letting your garden tell a story can "encourage reflection and meditation, bringing peace and harmony," Misty says. The Zen Ocean Overlook at [Sholom Park](#), pictured here, is rich in symbolism and helps connect viewers to their natural surroundings. The island to the left represents a volcano and suggests impermanence and transformation. The middle island--imagine it as a turtle carrying a crane on its back--indicates harmony and symbiosis. The island on the right symbolizes a strong, resilient mountain.

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Photo: Portland Japanese Garden/Wayne Williams

3 / 26

Use Sand and Stones to Represent Nature

Zen gardeners typically use sand and stone to represent larger landscapes, Steven says. "Stones can become mountains. Gravel and sand can feel like moving bodies of water." Whether they're seen "from the deck of a temple, a bench in a garden or through the window of a home," they "can transport the visitor to a grand scene in nature."

[Tour a Luxurious Zen Garden Retreat](#)



Photo: Portland Japanese Garden/Roman Johnston

4 / 26

Choose the Most Effective Light

Zen gardens don't have to be static. Although they create a sense of stillness, they're also meant to represent nature, which constantly changes. Before you create your garden, spend some time watching how the sunlight and moonlight move across the space you want to use. The shifting light can change look of the patterns, designs and textures in your sand, stones and gravel. Decide whether you want to add artificial lights for aesthetic appeal, or if lights from outside your garden (which may be beyond your control) will illuminate it. Choose a location for your garden that will provide the effect you want.

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5 / 26

Enclose a Corner of Your Yard

You don't need a lot of room for a Zen garden. If you want to create one in a small space, Hugo says, "The size of the garden is less important than how it fits within a landscape and in proportion with architecture. Choose materials that provide proportion, balance, and flow, with appropriate color, texture and form." This gardener enclosed a corner of the yard with a bamboo fence. Ferns and other green plants help it align with *Shinzen*, the Zen concept of naturalness, and a path invites visitors. You can use an existing fence or wall, or grow a bamboo screen or fence, but be aware that bamboo grows aggressively. Click the link below and read on before you plant it.

[Bamboo Plant: Get to Know It Before You Grow It](#)



Photo: Jeff McNamara. From: [Wesley Stout Associates.](#)

6 / 26

Complement Your Architecture

Designers were inspired by the architecture of this contemporary-looking home to create a Zen garden with modern materials and features. Concrete steps and gravel paths in neutral colors invite the owners and visitors to relax on the cedar benches and meditate. A rectangular pool also gives a nod to modern design. Ambient lighting from lanterns or thoughtfully placed candles would allow the garden to be enjoyed after dark.

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Photo: Portland Japanese Garden

7 / 26

Add a Lantern

Lanterns add visual interest to Zen gardens, and because they represent wisdom, light and hope, they can have a spiritual meaning. This stone lantern is an *ishi-doro*; it stands in the Strolling Pond Garden at the Portland Japanese Garden, where it's known as the Peace Lantern. Different sizes and shapes of lanterns are available to use near water, tea houses and other features. They're often used placed around ponds and streams, along paths, near stepping stones and bridges, or at the base of trees or rocks.



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8 / 26

Set the Scene with Size and Scale

"Stones need to speak to the space," Steven says. "The size of the stones and the plants should relate to each other. They absolutely set the scale for the scene. Sometimes, large stones in a smaller space create a feeling of vastness that can be powerful." The stones are usually placed in an asymmetrical arrangement for an organic look. Sometimes a large stone is used to as a "Buddha stone" with other, smaller ones nearby to represent disciples.

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Photo: Bob Farley

9 / 26

Include a Buddha Statue

Figures of the Buddha, who was born as Siddhartha Guana some 2,600 years ago, are popular in Zen gardens, where they symbolize enlightenment, act as a focal point for meditation and inspire calmness and balance. They're sometimes included to honor Buddhist teachings. You can find [Buddha statues](#) in a variety of sizes and poses. A seated Buddha statue represents tranquility and peace; a standing figure with one hand raised is said to symbolize protection, fearlessness and strength.



Photo: Chicago Botanic Garden

10 / 26

Prune and Shape Your Plants

Pine trees symbolize long life in Japanese culture, and, because longevity is revered, they're often pruned, shaped and trained to make them look old and aged. At the [Chicago Botanic Garden](#), Scots, Jack and Austrian pine tree branches are trained to grow horizontally, as if they're carrying the weight of many years. Each spring, the branch tips are hand-plucked to remove new growth, a process called candling, to control their shapes and sizes.

Shrubs may need pruning, too, depending on the kinds you're growing. If your Zen garden includes flowers, keep them deadheaded or remove them at the end of the season. "Aim for clean, natural shapes that suggest balance and age rather than heavy blooms," says Misty.

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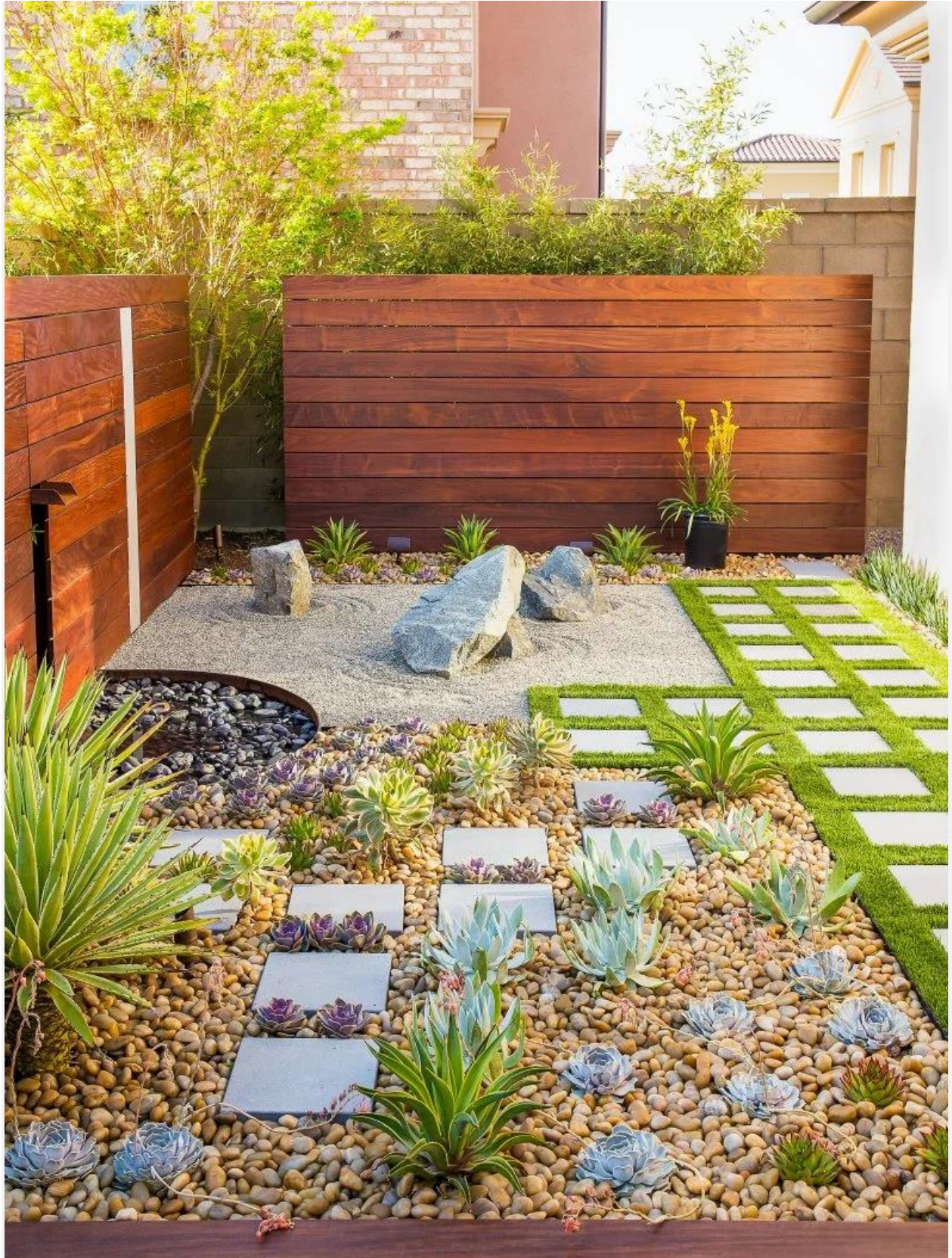


Photo: Warwick P Hunt. From: [Studio H Landscape Architecture](#).

Create a Zen Courtyard Feel

"Small spaces can hold some of the best gardens," Steven says.

"Homes, *ryokans* (traditional Japanese inns), restaurants and hotels can feature small courtyard gardens called *tsubo-niwa*. One of the secrets to getting the right feel of these spaces is to avoid creating miniaturized gardens." He says it's more effective to think of a full-sized Zen garden that has had a courtyard-sized section cut out and placed in your limited view. "Looking at the trunks of full-sized bamboo stalks that extend above your view can make you feel like you are in a grove. Keep the pallet simple. Perhaps three to five species are enough to create a full feeling." This corner garden has a courtyard feel.



Photo: Chicago Botanic Garden

Make a Cherry Tree a Focal Point

Ornamental cherry trees and their blossoms, called *sakura* in Japan, symbolize beauty, life and mortality in Japanese culture. Historically, they represented the

lives of samurai warriors. When the blossoms dropped, they signified the brevity of the warriors' lives.

While [cherry trees](#) aren't often used in authentic Zen gardens, they're grown in other types of Japanese gardens. And remember: today's Zen gardens can include untraditional elements, so if you love flowering cherries, plant them for their beauty and as a symbol of life's fragility and impermanence. Choose a variety recommended for your gardening zone.

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Photo: Japanese Tea Garden/Marissa Fong

13 / 26

Plant a Maple Tree for Color

[Japanese maple trees](#) are available in a variety of sizes and forms, with different leaf shapes and colors. In traditional Zen gardens, they're used sparingly, in keeping with the Zen concepts of simplicity and minimalism. Try a Bonsai or Japanese weeping maple to align with the concept of asymmetry (not all maples are asymmetrical). Although these trees are deciduous, many provide brilliant autumnal color. Most are hardy in zones 5 to 8; others, in zones 5 to 9. Look for a variety recommended for your gardening zone.

Discover Different Kinds of Maple Trees



Photo: Chicago Botanic Garden

14 / 26

Let Hostas Provide Leafy Contrast

Like ferns, [hostas](#) provide a soft contrast to other plants in your Zen garden. Here, they surround moss-covered rocks and a stone lantern at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Keep your design simple and serene with hostas in calming shades of green, white, cream and bluish-green, with smooth or textured leaves. These Asian natives are easy to grow. Most need moist, well-draining soil and dappled to full shade, but there are varieties that can some tolerate sun. They're generally hardy in Zones 3 to 9.

[Find Hosta Varieties for Your Shade Garden](#)

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Photo: Japanese Tea Garden/Saxon Holt

15 / 26

Accent With Azaleas

Each spring, these flowering [azaleas](#) and cherry trees add colors to the Japanese Tea Garden in spring. Authentic Zen gardens use neutral colors and few, if any, plants, although colorful azaleas can add welcome accents. They're usually pruned into mounds or low, natural-looking shapes for a harmonious look. They need acidic, well-drained soil that's been amended with plenty of humus. Many evergreen azaleas are hardy in Zones 6 to 9, while some deciduous types can overwinter to Zone 3. Most like dappled to partial shade, although some can take as much as full sun.

[Explore Azaleas in a Rainbow of Hues](#)



Photo: Portland Japanese Garden/Mike Centioli

16 / 26

Give Visitors a Path to Follow

Let a walking path lead viewers through your Zen Japanese garden and slow them down enough to observe and appreciate its various elements: plants, trees, rocks and stones. Winding paths feel more natural than straight lines and can be made of wood, [stepping stones](#), gravel, sand or packed earth. Strolling gardens, another type of Japanese garden, often use circular paths.

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Photo: Chicago Botanic Garden

17 / 26

Practice Peace Raking

Dry gardens, Steven says, are best when they're kept clean, and routine maintenance activities like raking can create a sense of peace and inspire contemplation. Drawing or raking symbols in sand, gravel or small pebbles can be therapeutic by relieving stress and focusing your concentration on the task at hand.



Photo: Shutterstock/AsyaV_k

18 / 26

Source Local and Inexpensive Materials

Although the founders of the Japanese Tea Garden initially used a bright white gravel, Hugo says it turned out to be distracting, and it was replaced with gravel in a muted color. You may be able to use rocks and stones from your property, or ask friends to let you take some from theirs. "Consider the cost of logistics if you're thinking about a bigger garden. Heavy stones may cost more to move than the material itself." Find local materials, when possible, or, as Steven suggests, substitute inexpensive roofing granules (not shown here) if your ideal gravel is too pricey.

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19 / 26

Put in a Water Feature

"Water symbolizes cleansing," Misty says, "so we do have small, self-contained water features in our Zen garden (in Sholom Park). If you choose to include one, "Adding a fountain, pond or other water feature will change your garden from a traditional Zen garden to more of a Japanese-style garden, but it can still capture the same peaceful, meditative feeling." This traditional Japanese *tsukubai* water fountain has a bamboo spout and stone basin surrounded by lush green plants and rocks covered with moss.



Photo: Shutterstock/Ttatty

20 / 26

Keep Your Garden on Budget

"A rock garden does not need to be big," Hugo says, "and because they often feature *yokau to ma no bi*, or the beauty of empty space, they may require less materials than a tea or strolling (Japanese) garden." If you're working with a budget, this small Japanese Zen garden can be duplicated easily. "Consider the cost of logistics," he adds, "if you're thinking about a bigger garden. "Heavy stones may cost more to move than the material itself."

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Photo: Shutterstock/Paula Cobleigh

21 / 26

Add Koi to a Pond or Pool

With or without koi, a pond or pool can also make a Zen Japanese garden feel tranquil and serene. This one is located at Oregon's Portland Japanese garden. In Asian cultures, beautiful, graceful koi, which can be white, gold, red, black or multi-colored are able to swim against strong currents, so they're said to symbolize perseverance, courage and the ability to overcome obstacles. You can buy a [preformed pond and accessories](#) or make your own.

[10 Things to Know Before You Build a Pond](#)



Photo: Shutterstock/Reflections of Reality

22 / 26

Grow Ferns for Contrast

Ferns provide a soft contrast to hardscape elements like the rocks, gravel and sand used in traditional Zen gardens. [Kepaniwai Park & Heritage Gardens](#) in Hawaii, shown here, is a public park with some Zen design features. Its ferns add texture and movement; in Japanese culture, ferns symbolize resilience and adaptability. Even their spores have a meaning. Because they give rise to new plants, they suggest the family and a hope for new generations. Consider ferns in muted colors, like Japanese Painted Fern (*Athyrium niponicum pictum*) or lacy Maidenhair ferns (*Adiantum spp.*). Most ferns need moist, well-drained soil in shade or dappled shade.

[Learn About Designing With Ferns](#)

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23 / 26

Add a Bench or Chairs

Zen gardens are meant to be restful, relaxing places for meditation and contemplation, so add a stone or [wooden bench](#) or a couple of chairs to yours. Having a place to sit encourages you and your visitors to slow down and take time to appreciate the garden's design and serenity. Keep the seating simple, and put it in a spot with a good view. Durable materials like teak, cedar, acacia wood or natural stone can stand up to the weather and last a long time.



Photo: FotoHelin

24 / 26

Meditate Indoors with a Miniature Garden

No outdoor space? Opt for a miniature Zen garden sandbox like this one. It uses a Buddha figure sitting in a Lotus position, a few stacked stones, sand and small, spa-type candles. Some [desktop Zen garden kits](#) include miniature rakes and other tools, as well as accent pieces like artificial plants or elephant figurines, as shown here. In Asian and Buddhist cultures, elephants represent strength, good fortune and wisdom. They're sold in many sizes and positions.

[Find Japanese Elements to Inspire a Zen Garden](#)

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Photo: Saxon Holt

25 / 26

Grow Thick, Lush Moss

This moss forms a lush carpet over the ground at San Francisco's Japanese Tea Garden. It can help absorb sounds in your Zen garden, making it feel more peaceful. [Moss](#) is a low-growing plant that needs little care and provides two essential concepts in a Zen garden: minimalism and simplicity. If you don't have a site already covered in moss, you can buy a variety of mosses online, or look for moss at home and garden centers and nurseries. Moss is usually shipped dry, so mold won't start to form; you can break it into pieces or plant it in clumps. Once it's well-watered, it should green up and grow.

[Learn About Growing Low-Maintenance Moss](#)



Photo: Japanese Tea Garden/Saxon Holt

Plant Irises in Moist Soils

These irises, flowering by a pond in California's Japanese Tea Garden, are typically used in Japanese gardens, but they don't grow well in authentic Zen gardens composed of sand and stones. They need acidic, moist soil, so they thrive around ponds or in bog gardens. If your Zen space has enough moisture, you can grow them in full to partial sun. Let the sword-like leaves remain after the flowers finish to contrast with the softer foliage and textures of hostas and ferns. In Zen Buddhism and Japanese culture, iris represent wisdom, courage, protection and strength. Look for varieties that are hardy in your garden zone. Shown here: "[Zen Garden Mix](#)" iris.