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A Day in the Life ...of a Zen Garden

by Jackie O'Hara

In June I was inspired to create a Zen Garden in my backyard after reading "Hand Wash Cold" by Karen Maezen Miller. Her down-to-earth writing about her Japanese gardens opened my mind to the beauty of the tasks of daily life, whether it be laundry, dishes and of course - the garden.

The traditional Zen landscape is a dry stone garden, and typically has the elements of loose stone which can be raked into flowing designs, rocks, sparse mossy plants and the suggestion of water.

There should be a seat nearby, because Zen gardens are meant to be an aid to meditation and art. The creative and spiritual placement of objects can be representative of nature and a metaphor of the journey of life.

For example, there may be a rock or "mountain" which is an obstacle or challenge. There may be stepping stones or a "bridge" to imply a pathway...and the stones can be raked to create an image of water with its dynamic or peaceful flow of energy.

I used a base of white sand, hung a hummingbird feeder over the garden for a water element, placed a Japanese garden lantern for the element of fire, and planted some sedum to represent the pathway. At this point my garden looked great but I was missing two things - an "obstacle rock" and the necessary Zen garden rake.

I had to laugh when I Googled Zen Rakes and saw hundreds on sale for under ten dollars. At closer look I realized they were for tabletop Zen gardens, a popular trend. The larger rakes cost hundreds and were out of my range. Then after more research I found out that real Zen gardeners make their own rakes.

Oh boy... I was sensing more of a commitment than I thought I could keep.

In the two months since I created my Zen garden, I have come to see its true purpose.

One of the most interesting things I found in my research is the Japanese concept of Wabi-sabi, which means: nothing lasts, nothing is perfect, and nothing is finished.

Once understood, one begins to know that true beauty is found in transience, imperfection and asymmetry. It's the blend of rough and smooth, light and dark, in the garden and in life. The twists and turns. It really is symbolic of life.

Here are some of my reflections...

- o Within hours of "finishing" the garden, I sat with a nice cup of tea and admired it. Suddenly, my large dog spied a large squirrel at the bird feeder and took off at breakneck speed, right through the perfect Zen garden sand. My first lesson: impermanence.
- o Because it was spring, my backyard looked like a Bambi scene. Bunnies, birds, and yes, one chipmunk. I decided to embrace the tracks in the sand, and named it Zen. Then, a few days later, two chipmunks. So I named them Zen & Ben. I liked how they were cleaning up the bird seed that the squirrel was knocking into the garden. Lesson: a solution will appear; and Nature has balance.

- o The first bad storm came, a Nor'easter. After two days of rain and wind, my garden was NOT Zen. Somehow I really had not thought of this possibility, even as a native New Englander. I reluctantly accepted that this garden was going to take some maintenance, and as of yet I had not made the rake. For the first time, I lit some incense inside the lantern and cleaned the leaves from the garden. It felt good. Lesson: Storms happen. It's up to me to deal with it, and I can.



- o In the heat of July I forgot about the garden a lot, but in a store found a little Buddha statue. Cleaning a closet I found a rose quartz crystal I had picked up off a desert in Colorado years ago. I finally forced myself to commit to a rock to represent my mountain. Still procrastinating about the rake. One weekend my husband went away to work on a project and came back late on Sunday. On Monday morning I sat down with my coffee and looked outside. There, leaning in the garden, was a beautiful Zen rake he had made for me from a cherry branch and dowels. I couldn't believe it; this was such a thoughtful gift. Lesson: Gratitude for the blessings I have.

The other day I cleaned up my garden again, using my new rake. I burn incense while I work, and I think I'm getting the hang of it. I don't know how all the mess gets there, but it does arrive, right on time and ready for me to fix it up again. There's a certain method that I've never been able to master before but with practice I think I just might get it. It's called "going with the flow."



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In addition to working with children for years, Jackie has worked as a naturalist and loves the outdoors. She lives in Brewster with her husband, two teenaged sons and Black Lab.

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