

‘Gem of Topeka:’ Kay’s Garden creates serene experience for guests

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Every Japanese garden has its own story, and the Topeka Zoo’s new Kay’s Garden is no different.

The story that unfolds as visitors walk the paths of the garden is one of love and family. In order to understand and appreciate any good story, one must start at the beginning.

Kay’s Garden, which was created in honor and with the help of its namesake, Kansas Supreme Court Chief Justice Kay McFarland, opened Thursday at the Topeka Zoo. The multimillion-dollar project broke ground in 2018, but the planning process started long before that.

The garden was conceptualized in 2012, but it wasn’t initially designed to be as grand as it became.

McFarland, who died in 2015, told the zoo in 2012 she simply wanted a koi pond with a bridge over it. Before the zoo would agree to set out on that task, it needed to make one point clear.

“The zoo was still kind of recovering from a low point in our history and made it very clear to Chief McFarland that we weren’t going to do something half-hearted,” zoo director Brendan Wiley said. “If we were going to do it, it had to be done right and it had to be done to the highest standard possible. What we didn’t realize at the time is that is exactly what she wanted to hear. If we weren’t going to do it right, she didn’t want to be involved either.”

After coming up with a \$400,000 design for a koi pond and bridge, the zoo showed McFarland the plan. Her first reaction was that it was too small, Wiley said.

“She was very involved in the conceptual process for this,” he said. “We knew that we wanted it to be able to be accessed from the parking lot but also accessed from the zoo. So that kind of told us where in the zoo it needed to be. We would show a plan to Chief McFarland to get a reaction and then she probably benchmarked with us over 1,000 photographs of gardens kind of around the world. That’s really when it became a Japanese garden. We knew that was really her desire.

“It was really our desire to be much more about landscape and less about structural architecture like some of the Chinese gardens are.”

While McFarland never had the chance to see the final plan for the Japanese garden, her trustee signed off on the design.

In order to truly experience the garden, which sits on 2.5 acres of land, guests enter through the south gate located within the zoo.

What once served as a service road for the zoo is now a blacktop path with a bamboo fence on the right. No portion of the Japanese garden is visible from here, but that is the idea, according to Wiley.

“Japanese gardens are kind of built on the notion of surprise, so you’re walking down this path, and then your first surprise is when you turn the corner and see the gate,” Wiley said.

A gate flanked by boulders welcomes visitors to the Japanese garden. But before entering, there is one important step.

A boulder sitting on a grassy area to the right of the gate is a place where guests can leave behind their frustrations before stepping into the garden.

“If you’ve got anger or hate inside of you, that’s where you can put it. Discontent, all of those kind of negative feelings that might take away from a spiritual moment, you just set them on the rock,” Wiley said. “As you step in, it should just feel different.”

Stepping beyond the gate, the serene and luscious Japanese garden is spread out before visitors. The newly planted foliage is vibrant, large burr oak trees stand tall and the many streams running through the garden seem to sing.

Guests standing inside the garden’s gate are presented with a choice. They can either go left or right along separate paths.

“Each path represents a journey through life,” Wiley said. “The path on the right is more rigid and angular, and the path on the left is more gentle and curved.”

The path on the right features an eight-plank or zig-zag bridge.

“When you see this style of bridge in a Japanese garden, it’s about the pursuit of true love,” Wiley said.

Vertical boulders that sit on the bank of a stream running under the bridge represent mountains.

Every portion of the garden has a purpose, Wiley said. Boulders have been specifically chosen and hand-guided into place.

Everywhere visitors look, they will see plants and grasses, of which there are over 150 varieties inside the garden, according to senior horticulturist Rick Knight.

If guests choose to begin their journey by venturing down the left path, it will first take them to the origin pool.

The pool of water, bound in by two small waterfalls on each side, is the beginning of the two streams that run through the garden, Wiley said.

Sitting above the pool is what is referred to as the waiting room.

“This is a place that you would come to wait for your mind and body to get ready to experience a Japanese garden,” Wiley said. “It’s very traditional, and this was built in a true ancient traditional style of carpentry.”

Koji Morimoto, the garden master, handcrafted the small structure that sits over the origin pool. It was built without screws — except for in the seating benches — and is designed to easily be taken apart and moved if needed.

“A fun part of this story is a lot of the lumber that was used out here in the garden, like this stuff, is all recycled utility poles,” Wiley said. “Koji liked that material because it was aged, so you don’t have to worry about it shrinking or warping.”

Visitors continuing on the left path will soon arrive at the crane tea house. The open structure overlooks a large pond with a red bridge that is framed by trees and plants.

The tea house offers an expansive view of the garden. At this point, those walking the path can look back to where they began and see where they are headed.

It is also a moment in which guests can envision what Kay’s Garden will look like in the future.

“In seven years this garden should really kind of start to peak, but it won’t be fully mature until it’s about 70 years old,” Wiley said. “An old Japanese garden is somewhere between 600 and 800 years old, so we don’t really comprehend that for the most part in this country. Koji definitely does, and he’s today planning for what this garden will look like 200 years from now, and it’s just a little strange to wrap your mind around that.”

As visitors continue walking north on the path, they will eventually reach a point in the garden where the two paths meet.

“This next section of path represents courtship, and through kind of that courtship experience, we are starting to leave the more privately sacred part of the garden into the more open and public area of the garden,” Wiley said.

The most northern bridge in the garden represents marriage. The red drum bridge is a style that McFarland chose, and it sits over the koi pond she originally wanted.

The path leads guests to an event venue that can be rented for weddings, reunions, birthday parties and meetings.

According to Wiley, the space can currently accommodate 80 people with the gathering restrictions put in place because of COVID-19. Under normal circumstances, the space can hold about 250 people.

Inside the event space is a gallery that compares Kansas and Japanese landscapes and displays information about the life and accomplishments of McFarland.

Floor-to-ceiling windows line the event venue’s walls, allowing Kay’s Garden to serve as the backdrop.

The garden, created with the help of many volunteers, tells many different stories and creates an experience that will leave visitors feeling at peace.

“I think this is just going to be the gem of Topeka because it’s so different than anything else that has ever been done here,” Knight said. “It’s going to just be fantastic.”

Morimoto said that not only is this the largest garden he has built, but it is special.

“This garden is special because of the many people involved with good heart,” Morimoto said.
“Each person has their own position. They put their best and good heart and good intentions for the community.”