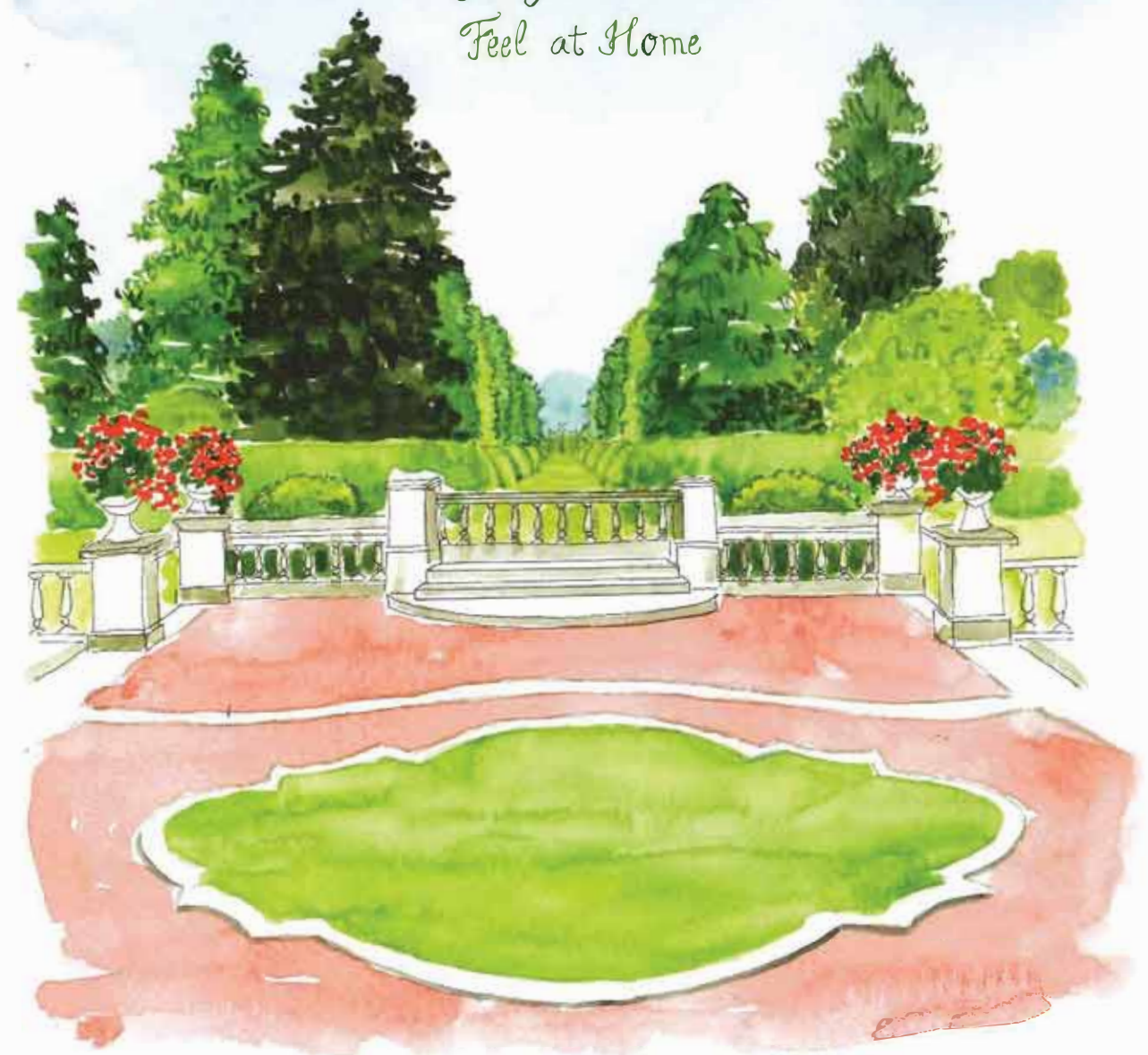


# Long Island

Part One

Making a Japanese Garden  
Feel at Home





My 80-year old neighbor tells me that back in her school days, back in the 1940s, the Old Money families of Long Island were still deeply offended by *The Great Gatsby*. In that book, F. Scott Fitzgerald had dared to make our neck of the woods look *tacky*.

You see, Jay Gatsby and those terrible people the Buchanans were made out to live on the North Shore of Long Island, and the North Shore has always held itself apart from -- and, I'll say it, *above* -- the rest of Long Island. That's why it's called the Gold Coast.

It all goes back to the Gilded Age, when the North Shore was where the millionaire bankers, lawyers, and industrialists of New York built their country castles. In those days, a 60-room pile of European architectural references was not deemed the least bit *tacky*.

F. Scott Fitzgerald estimated that it cost him \$3,000 a month to maintain his residence on the North Shore while he wrote *The Great Gatsby*, in 1924. At the time, the average salary for a certified public accountant was a whopping \$250 a month.

All this is context for the garden we are visiting in this chapter. Be assured that the garden is Old Money, and not at all *tacky*, but, in the best traditions of the Gold Coast, it is every bit the folly as any robber baron's pretend-Gothic castle.

Welcome to the  
**John P. Humes**  
**Japanese Stroll Garden.**



Your visit to the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden will give you absolutely no sense of John P. Humes, Princeton Class of '43. So let me tell you that John P. Humes was the scion of a socially prominent Virginia family, partner in a Wall Street law firm, and the Nixon-appointed ambassador to Austria (1969 - 1975). In 1960, he and his wife, Jean Cooper Schmidlapp, M.D., heiress to an old Ohio banking fortune, journeyed to Japan, after which John P. Humes returned with a hankering to have his very own Japanese garden on Long Island. So Dr. Schmidlapp Hume turned over this 4-acre (16,000 sq. meter) corner of their backyard to him, and he let rip.



At the Corner of Oyster Bay Road and Dogwood Lane.



The John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden was opened to the public in 1986.

Since 1993 the garden has been under the management of The Garden Conservancy, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Cold Spring, New York, dedicated to the preservation of exceptional gardens for the public's enjoyment and education.

### Every Garden Has a Point of View, Especially a Japanese Garden in 1960s America

In 1960, the year that John P. Humes made his fateful trip to Japan, the country was just eight years removed from its occupation by U.S. military forces following World War II. But in the meantime, there had been a complete about-face in American popular culture regarding its former enemy. Japan was now very much in fashion, particularly among the economic elites who could afford air travel. Filling one's home with Japanese decorative arts was a way of showing off one's internationalism.

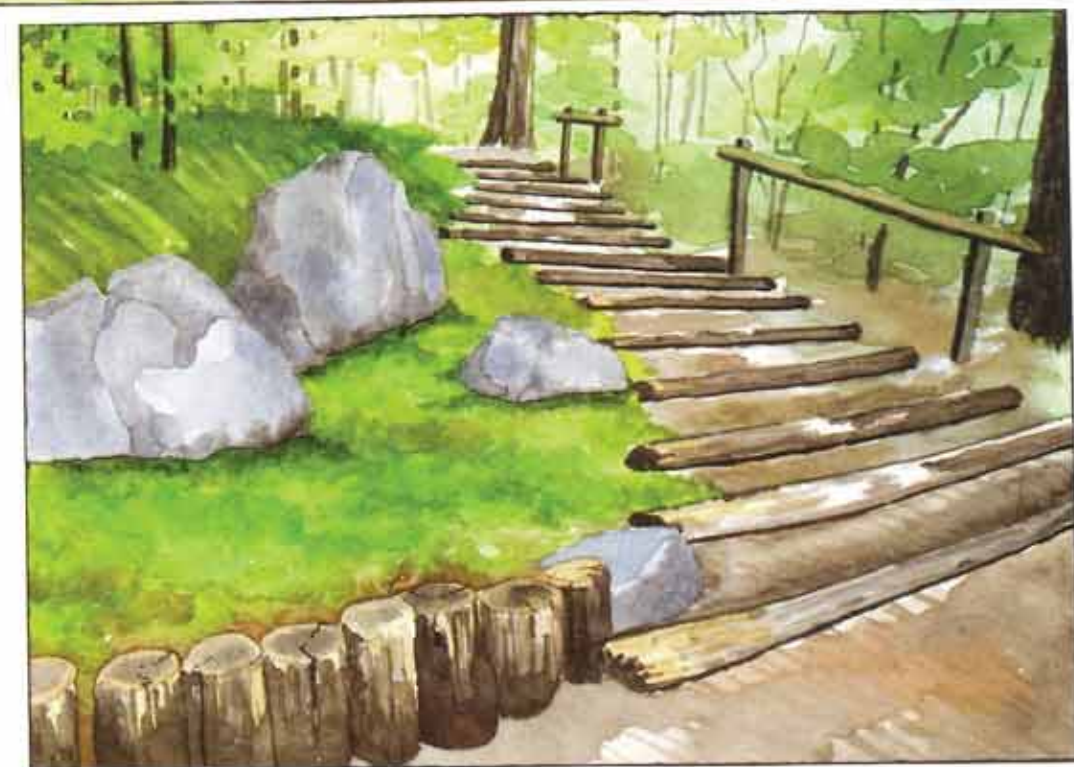
This fancy for Japanese novelties reached a peak in 1963, when a Japanese-language song became a Number One pop hit in America. It was given the nonsense name **Sukiyaki** because that was easier for Americans to pronounce than its *real* title, **Anoko-No Namae-Wa Nantenkana** (*I Will Walk Looking Up*).

The song tells the story of a man, haunted by regret and misery, who walks while looking up at the sky so his tears won't fall down his cheeks. The melancholy of the music (there's even some mournful whistling) sounded to its American audience like a classic break-up song ... but in actuality, the song was about the lyricist's anguish over the signing of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation Between the United States and Japan. Among Japanese Nationalists, America was very much *out* of fashion.

In my opinion, Japanese gardens in America translate about as well as Japanese pop songs. In other words: very, very poorly. For proof I give you the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden.

Although the space calls itself a **stroll garden**, a four-acre stroll garden such as this simply does not exist in Japan. Stroll gardens in Japan are set in ten to twenty acres of contrived scenery, and offer garden visitors miles and miles of pathways to give them the illusion of journeying to far-away places as they stroll along. Furthermore, the tea house, the Pond and Hill landscaping, and the Zen elements that are thrown into the experience of the John P. Humes Japanese garden don't make any sense *at all* in the context of a *stroll garden*.

Welcome to Mr. Humes's Folly.



These woods of Long Island  
are no different in make-up, mood, and spirit  
than any forest on Honshu.

Any Japanese visitor to the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden would feel very much at home in the shapes and shadows of the garden's trees and plants. That's because Japan and the northeastern United States have over one hundred species of trees and flowering plants in common, despite the two regions being 6,758 miles (10,876 kms) apart.

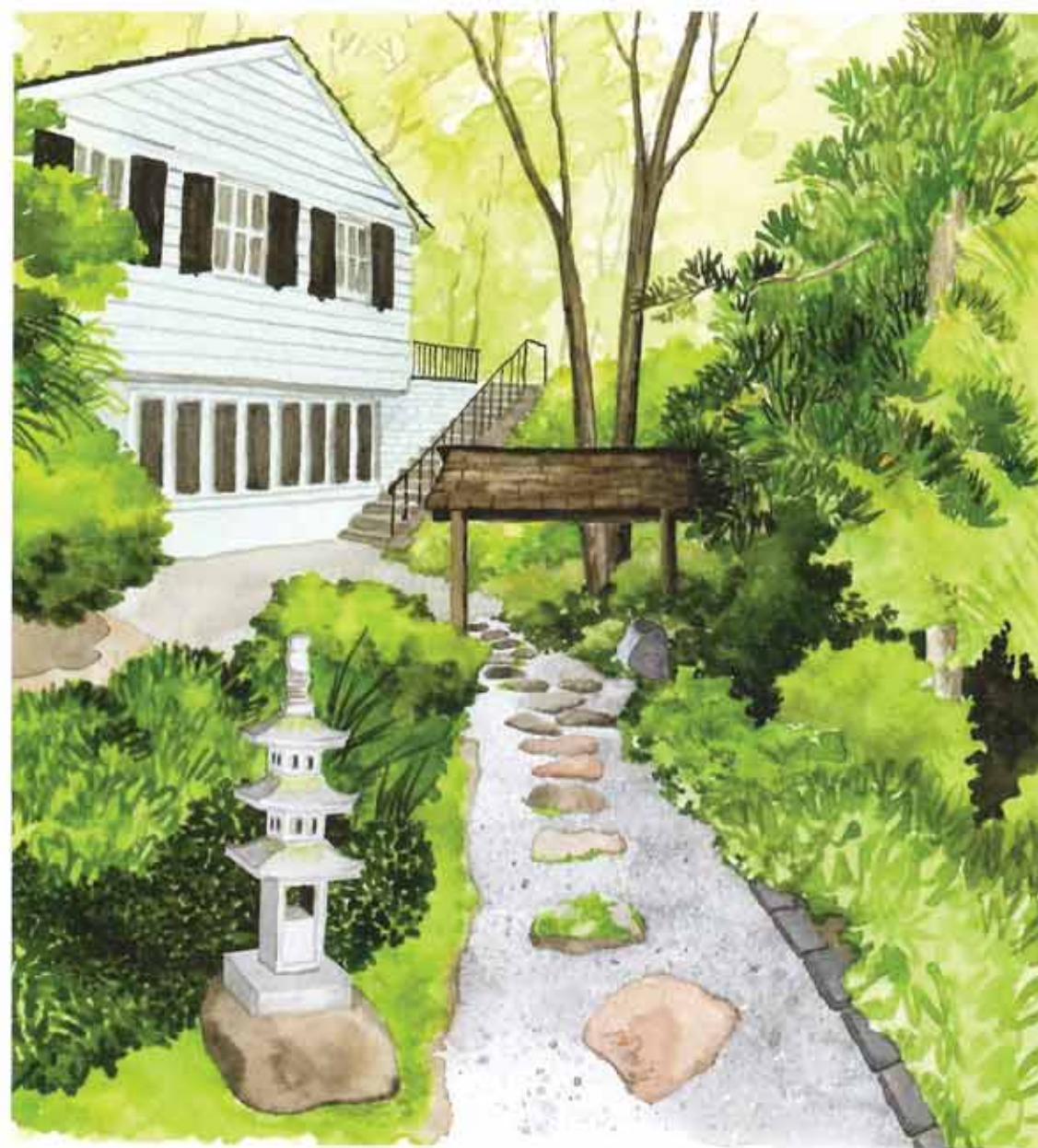
For centuries this odd *discontinuous* distribution had nagged the scientific community as one of the great horticultural mysteries. The mystery was solved in 1912, when a young geophysicist, named Alfred Wegener, took a look at a map of the Earth and noticed that the land masses might fit neatly together if the planet was reassembled in the manner of a picture puzzle.

And that's how Albert Wegener discovered **Continental Drift**.

North America, Europe, and Asia were once interlocked as a single super-continent called Laurasia. Laurasia came apart about 200 million years ago and as its assorted bits drifted to their current locations, new biomes formed on the now-isolated continents. Much of the original Laurasian ecology disappeared...except in the two places on Earth where the climate and the topography were just right for its preservation: the islands of Japan and the northeastern coast of the United States.

Over millions of years of separation, small differences in the Japanese and American context called for little tweaks to be made to their common botanical inheritance.

For example, the American Dogwood tree produces a small red berry, suitable to the digestive tracts of the 90 species of New World birds that eat and disperse the seeds within the berry. The Japanese Dogwood, on the other hand, had a whole different set of circumstances to deal with so, instead of producing a small hard berry for birds, it evolved something entirely different, a fat juicy fruit to tempt its native disseminators: Snow Monkeys.





American Jack-in-the-pulpit  
*Arisaema triphyllum*

Japanese  
Jack-in-the-pulpit  
also called Cobra Lily  
*Arisaema ringens*



American Lady Fern  
*Athyrium filix-femina*



Japanese  
Painted Fern  
*Athyrium nipponicum 'Pictum'*

American Sweetspire  
*Itea virginiana*



Japanese  
Sweetspire  
*Itea japonica*



American blue flag iris  
*Iris versicolor*

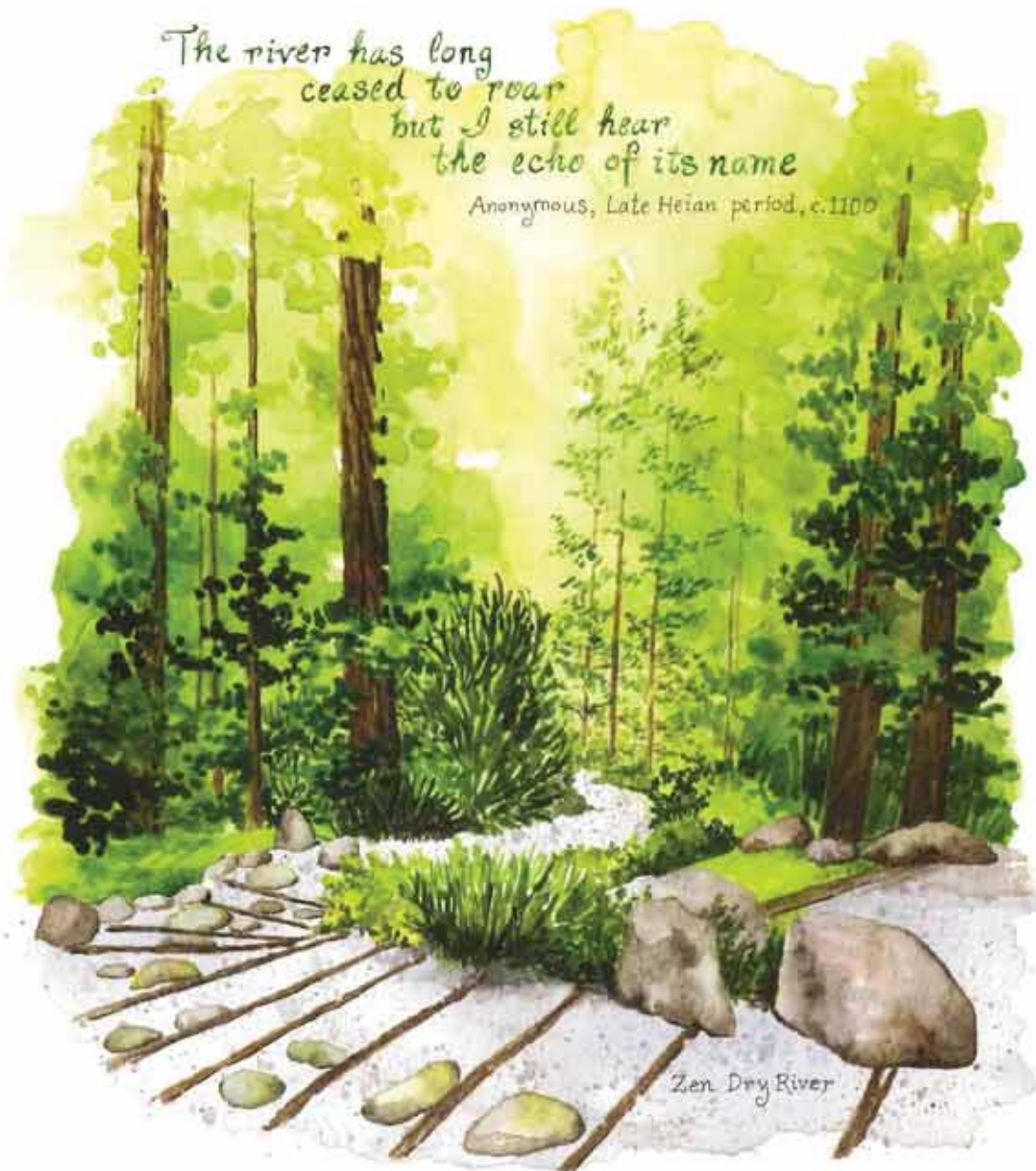


Japanese Iris  
*Iris kaempferi*



The river has long  
ceased to roar  
but I still hear  
the echo of its name

Anonymous, Late Heian period, c.1100



Zen Dry River

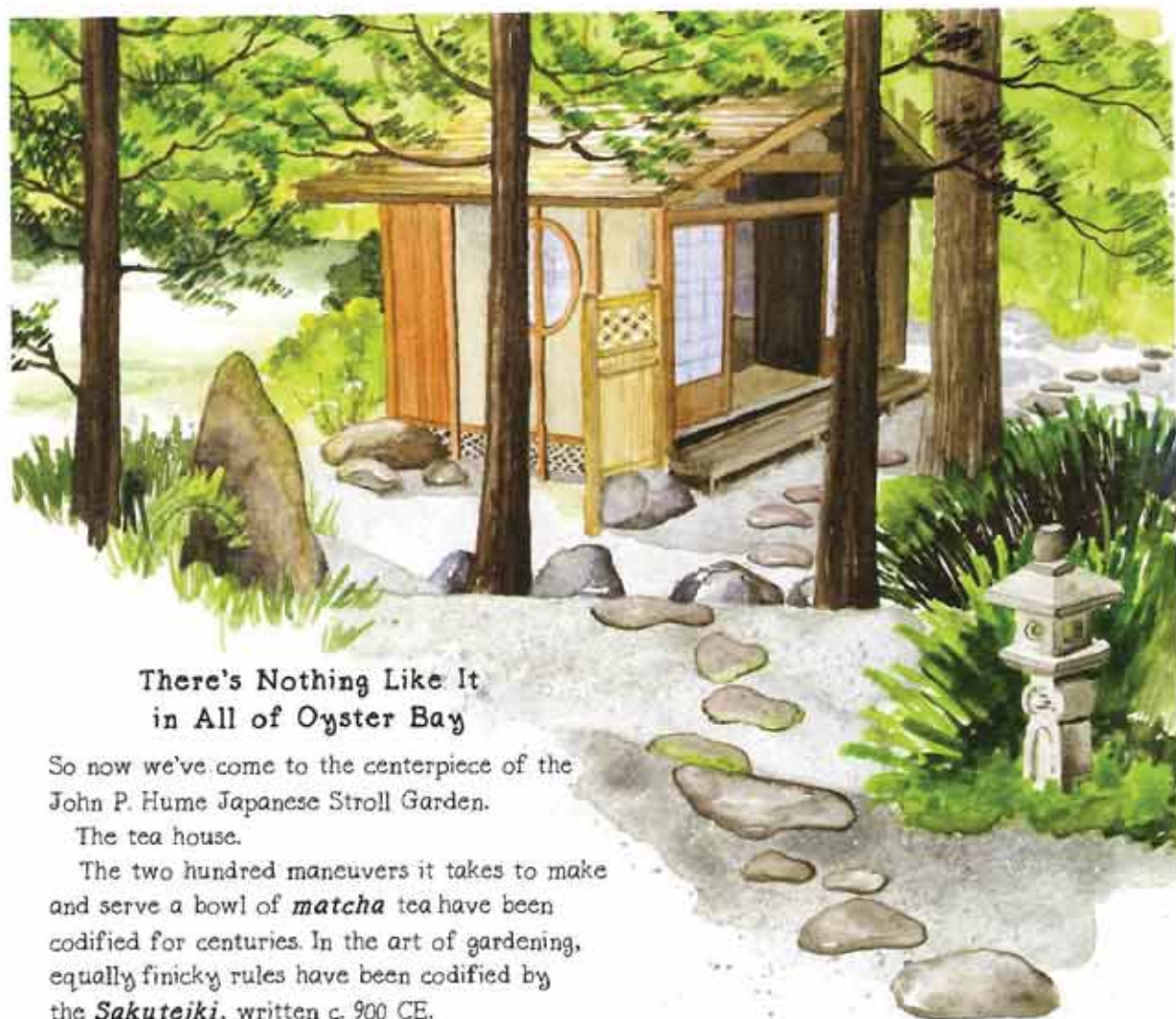
At the Bed of Moss Let Us Pause to Savor the Impending Nothingness  
That Dooms Every Atom in the Universe.



The most noble function of Japanese art is to express the melancholy of mortality and the inevitable decay of beauty, to act as a catalyst for the experience of sublime sorrow.

This mindfulness is found in every aspect of Japanese culture, in pottery, pop songs, haiku, and even in the way of tea.

When it comes to achieving that desired quality of existential desolation in a Japanese garden, it's moss that gets the job done.



### There's Nothing Like It in All of Oyster Bay

So now we've come to the centerpiece of the John P. Hume Japanese Stroll Garden.

The tea house.

The two hundred maneuvers it takes to make and serve a bowl of *matcha* tea have been codified for centuries. In the art of gardening, equally finicky rules have been codified by the *Sakuteiki*, written c. 900 CE.

Regarded as the gardening bible of Japan, the *Sakuteiki* is the source of 183 commandments for the proper setting of stones and the appropriate placement of streams, islands, trees, and waterfalls in order to achieve the correct *fusui* (feng shui) of the garden spirits.

Here is where I must confess that the one kind of tea I can't drink is *matcha* tea, and I don't much care for Japanese gardens either. All that over-thinking ruins two of life's most personal and ecstatic experiences, in my opinion. I believe that people should drink tea with abandon, and make gardens that are true to their own vision of the world.

Which is why I make an exception to my general dislike of Japanese gardens for the one and only John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden.



A *bijoux* Stroll Garden with bogus Zen-garden references and a misbegotten quasi-Tea Garden set in a New World Laurasian-esque woodland. I love this garden for being the marvelous, wacky, and earnest apparition of a Japanese garden experience that exists only in the mind and heart of

John Portner Humes.

This garden is one fine folly.

## The John P. Humes Gardening Tip: It's Never Too Late to Commit a Fine Folly

He who lives without folly is not so wise as he thinks.

Francois de La Rochefoucauld

He must have a little bit of folly who does not want to have more stupidity.

Michel de Montaigne

I always prefer the enthusiasm of a passionate folly to the indifference of wisdom.

Anatole France

When I call Mr. Humes's garden a **folly** I mean it with the greatest respect. I deeply admire the clarity and eccentricity of Mr. Humes' garden vision, and the tenacity and refinement of his actualization of it.

John P. Humes was 39 years old when he returned from his fateful trip to Japan. Back in 1960, that put him on the brink of middle age, when a man is most ripe for folly.

Folly holds a distinguished place in the Way of Gardening. In 1741 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Temple commissioned Capability Brown to rip up the grounds of his Buckinghamshire estate to plant a carefully designed English landscape garden in the *English landscape*.

Francois Racine de Monville (1734 - 1791), a well known ladies' man, created a 99-acre Anglo-Asian-Ottoman garden park near Paris simply to have a way to entice women to take long, private walks with him.

The Hon. Charles Hamilton (1704 - 1786) of Surrey famously hired a hermit to live in his garden. The contract required the hermit to go barefoot, never cut his hair, wear a raggedy woolen robe, and never speak to visitors.

A colonel who served under the Duke of Wellington planted his garden with hundreds of oak trees in the formation of the charge of British heavy cavalry at the Battle of Waterloo.

In 2000, the mayor of Kitagawa (pop. 1,500) opened the *Jardin de Monet*, a weirdly meticulous reproduction of Giverny, in the rainy mountains of Kochi prefecture. It has since become one of the most popular tourist attractions in all of southern Japan.

In 2009, the Pothole Gardener of London, Steve Wheen, started a world-wide movement to create "unexpected moments of happiness" by making miniscule gardens in surprising public places such as, well, potholes.

Hr. Humes's neighbors, the Coes, who lived half a mile up the road, filled their 400-acre property with an Italian garden, a beech copse, a dwarf conifer collection, a rhododendron collection, a collection of 100 species of holly from around the world, and a "synoptic" garden of 500 trees planted alphabetically.

Mr. Humes's Japanese Stroll Garden folly is in fine company.

