Long Island
Part One
Making a Japanese Garden
Feel at Home
My 10-year old neighbor tells me that back in her school days, back in the 1960s, the Old Money families of Long Island were well 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 business, lawyers, and industrialists of New York built their country estates. 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 $2,000 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 $30 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 potemkin Gothic castle.

Welcome to the
John P. Hunt
Japanese Stroll Garden.
Your visit to the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden will give you a
absolutely no sense of John P. Humes, Princeton Class of ’41. So let me
tell you that John P. Humes was the son of a socially prominent
Virginia family, partner in a Wall Street law firm, and the Nixon-
appointed ambassador to Austria (1969 - 1973). In 1961, he and his wife,
Jean Cooper Schmidlapp, M.D., who was an old Ohio banking fortune,
greeted to Japan, after which John P. Humes returned with a
hankering to have his very own Japanese garden on Long Island. So Dr.
Schmidlapp Humes turned over the 4-acre (0.64 acre) corner of
their backyard to him, and he let rip.

At the Corner of Oyster Bay Road and Dogwood Lane.
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 Nattekana (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. Huene 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 6,728 miles (10,816 km) 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 nearly 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 supercontinent 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 coasts 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: Cage Lady
Arisaema ringens

American Lady Fern
Athyrium felix-femina

Japanese Painted Fern
Athyrium niponicum 'Peckii'

American Sweetspire
Itea virginiana

Japanese Sweetspire
Itea japonica

American blue flag iris
Iris versicolor

Japanese Iris
Iris kaempferi
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 most 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 486 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 visions of the world.

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

A bijoux Stroll Garden with bogus Zen-garden reference and a misbegotten quasi-Tea Garden set in a New World Laureate-aynur woodland. I love this garden for being the marvelous, wacky, and earnest appendage of a Japanese garden experience that exists only in the mind and heart of John Porter Hume.

This garden is the first 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.
Francesco di 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.
Johann Pestalozzi

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 29 years old when he returned from his fateful trip to Japan. Back in 1969, that put him on the brink of middle age, when a man is most ripe for folly.

Folly holds a distinguished place in the history of Gardening. In 1741, the 2nd 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 Moirans (1754 - 1791), a well known ladies’ man, created a 99-acre Anglo-Asiatic-Ottoman garden park near Paris simply to have a way to entice women to take long private walks with him.

The Hon Charles Hamilton (1794 – 1846) 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 wooden 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. 15,606) opened the Jordia de Monet, a wondrous, meticulous reproduction of Giverny, in the main 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 Whelen, started a world-wide movement to create “unexpected moments of happiness” by making miniature gardens in surprising public places such as, well, potholes.

His Humes’s neighbors, the Coles, who took half a mile up the road, filled their 100-acre property with an Italian garden, a koi pond, a dwarf cypress collection, a rhododendron collection, a collection of 100 species of holly from around the world, and a “synoptic” garden of 800 trees planted alphabetically.

Mr. Humes’s Japanese Steel Garden folly is in fine company.