

Carter Center Japanese Garden Rooted Deep in Enduring Relationships

The serene and contemplative Japanese garden at The Carter Center has been described as the "centerpiece of Carter's hilltop complex, a graceful Japanese garden, around which the water cascades ceaselessly to a serene pond below."

The cool, clear morning of Oct. 1, 1986, welcomed Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter at the crest of the stone steps. They moved down toward the stone bridge leading to an island centered with two stone lanterns. Two small streams flowed on each side of the island from an upper pond to a larger lower pond. The Carters were followed by Japanese businessman Tadahiro "Tad" Yoshida, representing his father, Tadao Yoshida, the founder and head of Japanese manufacturer YKK, and the Japanese consul general in Atlanta, Tadayuki Nonoyama. Some of the women wore colorfully designed kimonos. The words among the speakers, who all knew each other well, were warm and celebratory, reflecting the camaraderie among friends and nations. Much was still to happen that day, including the larger dedication of the entire complex by Presidents Carter and Ronald Reagan. But this occasion in this place was special and unique. Jim Laney, then president of Emory University, prayed for the sanctification of this divine spot. One journalist reported on the morning event, "After Carter lit a ceremonial lantern, a flock of doves and an array of red, white, and blue balloons were released into the sky over the garden."

Over a year earlier, on July 24, 1985, President Carter and Consul General Nonoyama ceremoniously broke ground for the construction of the garden, assisted later by additional shovels wielded by Georgia Gov. Joe Frank Harris and Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young. Carter said the garden would symbolize the "international scope" of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum and The Carter Center.

Tadao Yoshida asked master gardener Kinsaku Nakane to design and build the Japanese garden. Nakane would also oversee the construction of the garden he had designed. He and his son, Shiro, attended and were celebrated for the beautiful garden they had created.

The friendship between Carter and Tadao Yoshida began in the early 1970s, when Carter, as governor, courted Yoshida and YKK, which Yoshida had founded and built into the world's largest zipper manufacturer. Yoshida, at Carter's behest, built YKK's first manufacturing facility in the United States, in Macon, Georgia, where the facility would also be the first Japanese manufacturing plant in the state. Groundbreaking was in 1973, and production began in 1974. Carter admired Yoshida, who imbued his company with a philosophy he called "The Cycle of Goodness," and the philosophy, "No one prospers without rendering benefit to others." Their friendship



President and Mrs. Carter take part in a ribbon-cutting ceremony during the dedication of the Japanese Gardens at The Carter Center in October 1986.

blossomed and grew. Tadao Yoshida was President Carter's personal guest at his presidential inauguration on Jan. 20, 1977.

The Garden Takes Shape

Tadao Yoshida and President Carter convened in 1982 as private funds were being raised and plans were in progress for the presidential library that Carter was to build. Carter would raise the money to pay for the library and museum and then transfer the facility to the federal government through the National Archives.

Carter's plans included not only the library and museum, but also two other buildings that comprised the separately owned and run Carter Center, the nonprofit institution where Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter focused his post-presidency on public health, peace, democracy, and human rights. Later, the Center would add the Ivan Allen III Pavilion and the Cecil B. Day Chapel.

The Yoshida family and YKK were among the donors for all four buildings. Under the Carters' leadership and nurturing for over 40 years, the Center has significantly impacted millions of people around the world.

At that meeting in 1982, Yoshida told President Carter he wanted to donate a Japanese garden to the Center. Carter's then chief of staff Dan Lee, who later served as construction manager for the Center, and Carter's personal lawyer, Terry Adamson, were present for the meeting.

Carter was especially concerned about the seemingly daunting task of raising $25 million, the Center's estimated cost, but graciously accepted Yoshida and YKK's offer to build a Japanese garden. Adamson asked Yoshida whether a designer had been selected. He replied that one had not been chosen, but they would find and commission the best Japanese gardener that could be found. Adamson had met Kinsaku Nakane in Kyoto in 1974 when he was in Japan for a year as a Luce Scholar. Julie Moir, another Luce Scholar, was apprenticed to Nakane in Kyoto. Nakane was a well-reputed gardener, known especially for restoring several ancient gardens in Kyoto. Adamson merely mentioned his name to Yoshida as a Japanese gardener he had met, and Yoshida was expectedly noncommittal.

In time, Yoshida told President Carter that YKK had indeed commissioned gardening master Kinsaku Nakane to design and build the garden. Nakane and his son, Shiro, who was also in his father's landscape and gardening business in Kyoto, made several extended trips to Atlanta to plan and construct the garden, including carefully selecting the giant boulders it needed. After the 1985 groundbreaking ceremony, Tad Yoshida, President Carter, Lee, Adamson, and Kinsaku and Shiro Nakane gathered in a construction trailer on the grounds to enjoy a special sake brought for the occasion and to toast the successful completion of the Carter Center Japanese garden.

For over a year, Kinsaku and Shiro Nakane, working with EDAW, an Atlanta-based landscape firm, constructed the garden, completing and dedicating it the morning of the Carter Center's afternoon dedication. Observers enjoyed watching the progress of its construction, as well as the difficulties and challenges, including Kinsaku Nakane's hands-on maneuvers with a giant crane that positioned the massive granite boulders to frame the garden. Nakane created a stone pathway leading down the hill to a 12-foot stone slab bridge over the small creek that flowed from one of the two waterfalls located above the garden. A 6-foot-high rock lantern and a smaller rock lantern serve as focal points on the island between the two streams.

Nakane created the language of one bronze plaque that sits in the garden:

> "Reflecting the landscape of deep mountains and secluded valleys, this Japanese garden, with its Large Falls and Small Falls, is rich in symbolic meaning: the Large Falls, magnificent and dignified, symbolize President Carter, a man of grace, sensitivity, and

integrity. The Small Falls is a cascade, symbolizing the beautiful Mrs. Carter, a lady known for her intelligence and continuing contributions to the President's great achievements.

"The clear, swift Large Falls dashes against the rocks and, merging with the Small Falls, flows into a Large Pond. This part of the landscape, distinguished by its confluence of waters, symbolizes the President's wisdom and his compassion for mankind. The two stone lanterns placed in the heart of the garden symbolize the hope that the activities of the Carter Presidential Center will bring the glorious light of peace and happiness to shine in every corner of the world."

The other plaque in the garden, in both English and Japanese and dated Oct. 1, 1986, is titled "The Carter Presidential Center Japanese Garden."

"As an expression of the long personal friendship and warm relationship with President Jimmy Carter, this Japanese garden was contributed by Tadao Yoshida, Founder and President of Yoshida Kogyo K.K. (YKK), and it was designed by Kinsaku Nakane, a renowned Japanese landscape architect."

An impressive collection of more than a dozen red and Japanese maple trees, along with some 2,300 Oriental (and some native) shrubs, frames the garden. The garden features a diverse array of plants, including azaleas, rhododendrons, Japanese maples, river birches, camellias, golden raintrees, and barberries.

Atlanta Journal-Constitution reporter Mark Stith wrote, "One way in which Nakane provided unity to the plant assortment was with natural elements, stone and water." Stith added, "It's also surprising that such a large and tremendously varied grouping of plant material in a relatively small area doesn't come off looking a bit overcrowded. But the collection of plants does work, creating a singular pleasing effect that testifies to Nakane's design skill."

Over time, the garden has matured, and now, under the nurturing care of the Carter Center's groundskeepers, it bathes in the changing lights of the four seasons. One spectacular byproduct often photographed is the striking view of downtown Atlanta from the garden's edge at the lower pond, especially in the special hues and colors of the soft morning and sunset lights.

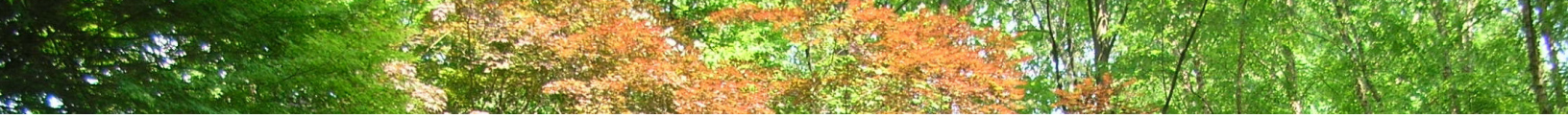
Nakane built his second Japanese garden in the U.S. in 1988 at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, also widely praised — Tenshin-en, or the "Garden of the Heart of Heaven."

Nakane designed that garden as a viewing garden in the karesansui style, "the goal of which is to suggest magnificent scenes from nature by forming the shapes of various landscape elements such as waterfalls, mountains, islands, and ocean," Nagane wrote. "Thus the garden expresses the vastness of nature in miniature, within a strictly limited space."

Kinsaku Nakane died in Kyoto on March 1, 1995. Shiro Nakane has continued his father's legacy, and he too has gained renown as a master gardener, designing and building Japanese







gardens in numerous locations throughout Japan and internationally. Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter visited the Nakanes in Kyoto and developed a special affection for the Carter Presidential Center's Japanese garden, spending personal time in the contemplative solitude of this incredibly special garden.

The Carters, the Yoshidas, and YKK

YKK commissioned Macon artist Sterling Everett to capture an image of the garden. He presented a lithograph of his watercolor to the Carters in December 1990, which they used as their holiday card to family, friends, and Carter Center supporters the following year. The work is titled "Reflections of Peace," and it hangs in the Center near the Carters' offices.

Tadao Yoshida was a Founding Member of The Carter Center, a major donor, and a key contributor to the Japanese garden at the Center. He died on July 3, 1993, and was succeeded as president of YKK by his son, Tad, who had worked in various capacities at the company prior to his father's passing. Tad Yoshida later served as chair of YKK and in 2020 became corporate advisor. In 2024, he was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star 2024 for distinguished service to his nation and for public service.

When the Carter Center Board of Trustees was established in 1994, Tad Yoshida was a member of that 22-person governing body, which also included Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter. Yoshida continued to be a significant donor, along with YKK, and served on the Carter Center's board until November 2014, a 20-year tenure. President Carter visited with three generations of the Yoshida family in both Plains and Japan over the years. Most of Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter's visits to Japan with Tad Yoshida included a stop at a favorite yakitori restaurant in the Roppongi district of Tokyo. A plaque today marks the many meals they enjoyed there, still sitting at the restaurant at their regular table.

Today, the YKK company employs over 2,000 Americans, 1,600 of them based in Georgia. Hundreds of Japanese companies, including YKK, have established operations in President Carter's home state, collectively employing more than 30,000 Georgians.

In November 2025, with the full blessing of Tad Yoshida and family, the Japanese Garden was renamed the Terrence B. Adamson Japanese Garden, in honor of the transition of Terry Adamson to trustee emeritus.

A Long and Abiding Relationship with Japan

There are significant other manifestations of President Carter's keen lifelong engagement with and interest in Japan. The Carter presidency is remembered for significantly improving relations between Japan and the United States. He made two trips to Japan as president: in June 1979 for the Group of Seven Summit in Tokyo, and again in July 1980 for the funeral of Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira. No prior president had made two trips to Japan while in office, and the first sitting president to make one trip was President Carter's immediate predecessor, Gerald Ford.

President Carter also appointed former Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield as U.S. Ambassador to Japan, which was perceived as extremely prestigious by the Japanese people. Mansfield continued to serve as ambassador until the end of the Reagan administration, for a remarkable 12 years.

Besides the initiative with YKK as governor and establishing the first Georgia trade and tourism office in Tokyo, Gov. Carter was associated with founding the Trilateral Commission in 1973, which sought to foster close cooperation among Japan, North America, and Western Europe; it held its inaugural meeting in Tokyo in October 1973. It was then that Carter came to know Ohira, who was then foreign minister.

President Carter said on occasion that he was as close to Ohira as any other foreign leader. Ohira was a fellow Christian, and President Carter said that he and Ohira had many faith-based discussions. That relationship was the basis for President Carter's decision to personally attend his friend's funeral. President Carter's personal diary notes on June 30, 1980: "Ohira was a special friend of mine in a strange way—a Christian leader of Japan who fought for stronger ties with our country against formidable political pressure."

The Peace Bell

In addition to the Japanese Garden, another tangible symbol of President Carter's affinity with Japan is the 200-year-old Peace Bell that has been at The Carter Center since 1985. Cast in bronze in 1820, the Peace Bell began as an ordinary temple bell in Konu (now Miyoshi City, Hiroshima Prefecture), ringing out across the immaculate grounds and landscaped gardens of the Shoganji Temple complex. The bell, weighing just over 550 pounds, stands 3 feet tall with a diameter of approximately 2 feet. According to accounts at the time of casting, the chief priest of the temple gave this statement of the bell's function: "If you strike this bell, first the Buddha will come. Second, it will destroy sin and suffering. Third, it will dispel all demons."

For over 100 years, the resounding bell was a welcome and familiar sound to the temple monks and residents of the adjacent village, signaling the hour, calling the faithful to Buddhist rituals, and even raising a clamor in times of emergency.



Cast in 1820 and weighing over 500 pounds, the Peace Bell was a gift from the Japanese people to President and Mrs. Carter in 1985.

During World War II, when an order to collect metals was decreed throughout Japan to feed its war machine, the military turned to defenseless bell towers. The Shoganji Temple bell went to the Japanese Navy, but before it could be melted down for armaments, Japan surrendered.

How the bell subsequently ended up in England remains a mystery, but it was acquired by an Englishman named James Taylor. His son, Milos Taylor, discovered the bell in 1958 while sorting through his late father's belongings. In 1982, Milos Taylor moved to East Orange Park, Florida, with the bell. Before returning to England in 1985, he put the bell up for sale. The Japanese Chamber of Commerce and the Consulate General of Japan in Atlanta purchased it for $3,000. On July 24, 1985, when the Carter Center Japanese Garden groundbreaking occurred, Tadayuki Nonoyama, consul general of Japan in Atlanta, and Hiromitsu Araki, chairman of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce in Georgia, presented the bell on behalf of the Japanese community to President and Mrs. Carter to commemorate the construction of The Carter Center and in appreciation of President Carter's work promoting world peace.

Not long after the bell was donated to The Carter Center, Hajime Akiyama, a member of the Japanese Parliament, visited the Center. He noticed an inscription in Japanese on the bell connecting it to the Shoganji Temple in Bingo Province (now Hiroshima Prefecture). Upon his return to Japan in September 1987, he sought out the temple guji (or chief priest), Tomoo Terashi, and informed him of his discovery. With the bell long thought to have been destroyed in the war, the guji was thrilled to learn that it instead had found its way to President Carter and was safe at The Carter Center, founded on the pursuit of peace.

The parties agreed that the original bell should remain in Georgia, in appreciation of the former president's efforts toward world peace and the development of Japan-Georgia relations. The bell was dedicated in 1989 as the Peace Bell, a symbol of goodwill between Japan and the United States, and displayed inside The Carter Center as the "Hiroshima Bell, Symbol of Peace" with an explanatory note.

The mayor of the bell's hometown in Japan invited President Carter to visit Konu in October 1990. President Carter accepted, arriving with Mrs. Carter in time for the unveiling of a replica bell cast to celebrate the original's rediscovery. The new bell is dedicated to the Shoganji Temple as the "Bell of Friendship" and conveys expectations for world peace and mutual exchange.

Hundreds lined the streets of Konu to welcome the Carters. Thirty years later, their presence and importance to the town can still be felt.

"This Peace Bell demonstrates many things in addition to peace. Among the most important is a continuing friendship and mutual trust and partnership between the people of Japan and the people of my country," President Carter said during the ceremony in 1990. There was thunderous applause from the many onlookers as he and the temple priest rang the replica bell.

President and Mrs. Carter returned to Konu to see the Jimmy Carter Civic Center after their climb of Mount Fuji in July 1994. The townspeople again turned out in large numbers along the streets to welcome their friends.

Many years later, President Carter's presence and importance to the town can still be felt, with baseball stadiums named after him, a Jimmy Carter Civic Center featuring an impressive exhibit about his life, and one of the most notable streets, Carter Avenue.





On Sept. 30, 2022, the Center held a dedication ceremony for a new Japanese bell tower to house the Peace Bell. The tower is an exact replica of the one in Konu, Japan, where the bell originated, and was built under the supervision of Japanese carpenters. The event featured a traditional Buddhist ceremony that is performed at the opening of a new temple and a ceremonial ringing of the bell.

While the original bell was safely preserved at The Carter Center, it did not do what bells are made to do: ring. A more visible permanent home in a traditional Japanese bell tower on the Carter Center grounds has since been built. The Japan-America Society of Georgia spearheaded an initiative, raising more than $300,000 to complete the project.

The tower was modeled after the Shoro-Do bell pavilion at Shoganji Temple. Wood for the frame was harvested from a 150-year-old cypress tree felled in California expressly for the bell tower's construction. Carpenters and artisans from Japan traveled to Atlanta to complete the intricate work in a centuries-old traditional style. The ribbon-cutting was on Sept. 30, 2022, just in time for President Carter's 98th birthday the following day.

Carters Climb Mount Fuji

In late June and early July 1994, just after President Carter's significant peacekeeping mission to North Korea, President and Mrs. Carter visited Japan to open the American Festival Japan 1994, a nationwide event showcasing American culture and history. He had been invited by his former vice president, Walter F. Mondale, who was then U.S. ambassador to Japan.

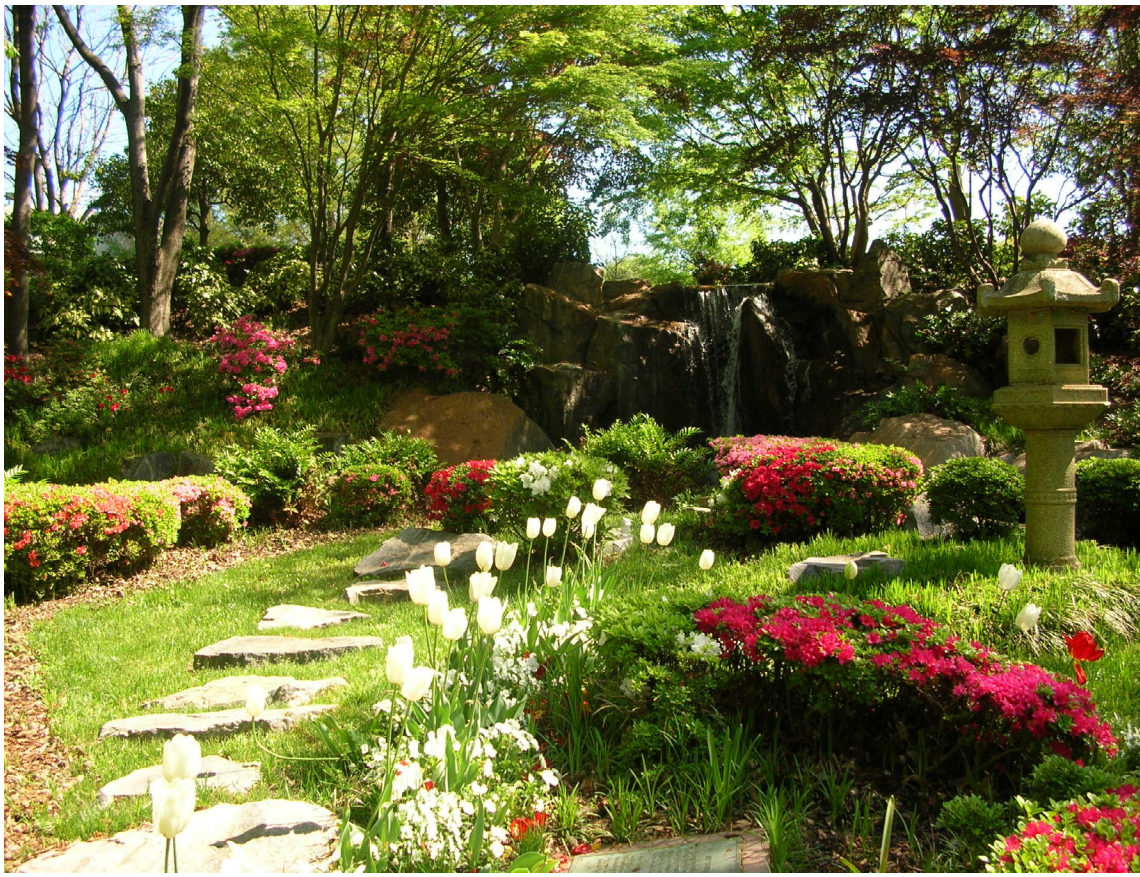
His wife, Joan, a longtime advocate for the arts, arranged for Mrs. Carter and her guests to work with a pottery master near Mount Fuji. After the success of President Carter's mission to North Korea, he particularly enjoyed the time for relaxation and thought, as well as reflection, with the man who became his close friend and confidant, Fritz Mondale. He and Joan made that visit especially enjoyable for the Carters.

Just before they were to leave Japan, Ambassador Mondale told President Carter that he had learned that the "Great Leader" of North Korea, Kim Il-sung, whom President Carter had just visited, had suddenly died at age 88 of a heart attack on July 8, 1994.

The Carters, on that trip to Japan, also did something they had long wanted to do—climb Mount Fuji. They had traveled for a few days in Japan in September 1981 after their August trip to China at Premier Deng Xiaoping's invitation. Deng's own trip to the United States after President Carter's normalization of relations with China was supposed to be reciprocated by Carter as president, but that never happened. Deng wanted him to come anyway, bringing his family and some friends. After the China visit, the Carter group did some traveling in Japan, as Carter said, "with an emphasis on fun." His Japanese hosts invited the group to fly-fish a stream at the base of Mount Fuji. President Carter wrote in one of his books, "We found the perfectly clear stream heavily stocked with rainbow and brown trout, but with dozens of news reporters and more than a thousand spectators crowding both banks and filling a crossing bridge." He hoped to come back to Mount Fuji sometime to climb to its summit.

That time came in July 1994. The visit was organized by Itochu Corp., a strong supporter of The Carter Center. The Carters stayed at a traditional ryokan (Ubuya Ryokan) on Lake Kawaguchi and enjoyed, all dressed in their casual kimonos, a traditional Japanese meal the night before their ascent of Mount Fuji.

About 6:30 a.m. on July 5, 1994, Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter and their guests were taken to Mount Fuji's fifth station at approximately 7,600 feet. They began their ascent as dawn came on a clear and cool summer day. They would stop at each station to have that station's mark branded with hot



iron stamps on their wooden hiking staffs. (At Mount Fuji, such a staff is called a kongo-zue, which serves as both a walking aid and a spiritual companion on the pilgrimage to the top.) The traditional staff for this day's climbers had small American and Japanese flags at its top.

The party reached the 12,389-foot summit in the early afternoon, and the party had lunch and signed each other's kongo-zue. By the time they returned to the fifth station, it was well after dark. Tired and proud, they returned to their nearby ryokan. Their guide, Omata Hikotaro, a veteran leader of Mount Fuji summits who had just turned 80, said afterward that for the honor of guiding President and Mrs. Carter, this would be his last guided climb. President Carter wrote about the climb in his book *Sharing Good Times* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) in a chapter titled "Panmunjom to Mount Fuji." President Carter was approaching 70 when he and Mrs. Carter climbed Mount Fuji.

Extensive media coverage accompanied their ascent of Japan's sacred mountain. President Carter was quoted by one Japanese publication as saying, "I have climbed high mountains such as Kilimanjaro, but Mount Fuji was just as difficult. I realized that Fuji is a sacred and beautiful mountain. I am grateful that I was able to make the summit." He became the first American president to have climbed this symbol of Japan.

A year after his climb, President Carter published a book of his poetry, "*Always a Reckoning and Other Poems*" (Times Books Random House, 1995), and one poem is called "Flying into Japan and Seeing Mount Fuji above the Clouds."

"We've climbed some peaks
that dwarf this flawless cone
seeming to float above Japan,
the whitest clouds turned drab
against its lustrous side.
Its calm,
its solitude and strength,
all say
some things will abide,
if not
the fruitless, transient labors
of our lives."

a haiku
Fuji humbles us—
Its strength and lasting beauty
with our own fleeting lives.