

Garden provides a Japanese experience on the Prairies

TALES FROM THE ROAD



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The grounds are dominated by a classical Japanese pavilion, home to events such as the ancient tea ceremony. Pagodas, a bell tower, and trees pruned to exacting standards surround a pond. Visitors learn about the time-honoured symbolism from hosts and hostesses in traditional dress.

It's as if we've wandered into an historic site in Japan, yet we're still in the midst of the Canadian Prairies.

The Nikka Yuko Japanese Gardens in Lethbridge are not only unique, they provide an oasis of tranquility in the middle of the city.

For more than 50 years, the gardens have been an integral part of Lethbridge's cultural scene. They opened in 1967 to honour the contribution that those of Japanese ancestry have made to the community and symbolize the friendship between nations.

Constructing the gardens was a painstaking process. The garden's architect first visited Alberta to experience the climate, culture, and different landscapes, then decided how to incorporate nature's elements into the design. Some trees were just saplings when the garden opened, but are now mature and carefully pruned. Because of the variety of trees and plants, there's usually something blooming throughout the spring and summer. Fall colours were also planned, with the foliage changing colour at different times.

Visitors can walk around the entire gardens on their own, but better yet, they can join a tour to



The Nikka Yuko Japanese Gardens aren't what many people might expect to find during a visit to Lethbridge. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

learn more about the symbolism of the garden's many features; things that aren't obvious wandering on your own.

It seems that placement of every tree, rock and other feature were planned in minute detail. Our guide and hostess, Indy, told the story of the architect who returned after a few years and decided that the level of the pond had to be lowered by a couple of inches because the amount of shoreline or rocks showing above the water surface wasn't quite right.

The centrepiece is the spacious pavilion or teahouse. Constructed entirely in Japan, then disassembled and re-assembled here, the impressive building has no nails, screws or wood glue. The first thing we noticed after stepping inside is the sweet smell from the yellow cypress trees used in its construction. The floor squeaks, but this is by design. In the old days, the samurai would use this as a security system in case an enemy was sneaking around. An exhibit outlines the garden's history and com-

memorates imperial visits by the Japanese royal family.

The central area is used for special presentations and events such as the intricate tea ceremony, filled with rituals and complexities. Indy explained that she had been training for four years, but didn't consider herself ready or good enough yet to serve tea properly to guests.

The Dry Rock Garden adjoining the pavilion consists of nothing but rocks and sand. This is a place meant for contemplation as you look at the patterns of the rocks and sand and imagine islands, clouds, ripples from a stream flowing around the rocks — you name it. Only the large rocks remain in place — garden designers change things up often, moving smaller rocks around and varying the sand patterns.

Standing outside on the pavilion deck, we could see many of the garden's features, such as pagodas, bell tower, bridges, and waterfalls,

but not all of them at the same time. This was done intentionally, conforming to the design known as "hide and reveal". Since the path through the garden is not a complete circle, the idea is to take one route to the end, then return another way for a completely different perspective.

Nikka Yuko has a full slate of events year round, with many weekend activities. This year, visitors can learn about Sumo wrestling and its rules by watching live tournaments taking place in Japan. They can even dress in Sumo garb. Tea ceremonies take place on a regular basis, and special horticultural and historic tours are offered, along with moonlight viewing and exhibits by local artists.

For details, see the garden's website at www.nikkayuko.com.

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There are no bad views on the grounds.



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