

# **Report on The Hardy Plant Society funding, for training in skills to manage Cowden Japanese Garden.**



Cowden Japanese Garden, November 2016

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## 1. Funding Proposal

The award would be used to increase my knowledge and practical experience of Japanese gardening techniques, specifically pruning and training of conifers. It would also broaden my understanding of plant choice within Japanese gardens.

This would involve a number of different elements;

- Conifer pruning and training at Royal Botanic Garden Kew.
- Visit to Japanese Gardens within the London area.

## 2. Estimated and actual costs

Actual cost

Item	Cost
Train fare to London return	£273.60
Transport to / from Kew and around London	£35.40
Living costs within London (5 days)	£122.11
<b>TOTAL COSTS</b>	<b>£431.11</b>

I have enclosed a cheque for £70 to reimburse The Kenneth Black fund for the amount of the bursary unspent.

## 3. Learning outcomes

### 3.1 Technical skills and plant knowledge

Four days were spent working in The Japanese Landscape at Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, with Jake Davies, the Botanical Horticulturalist who maintains the area. We concentrated on the autumn thinning of the pine needles (*momiage*) of two of the *Pinus nigra* that are trained in niwaki style in the garden.

The third and fourth year old needles are darker green than the first and second year old needles. It is these older needles that were removed, along with younger needles, if they were growing directly downwards from the branch. This opens up the structure of the tree, allowing light into lower branches which helps maintain the needles on the lower branches. This process can be done from October / November through to late winter.

Another process which Jake described was candling. This is carried out at RBG Kew between the first and second week of May. As the new buds (candles) of the pines are lengthening and the needles start to emerge from the candle, the bud is reduced by half to control the growth of the tree. Trees should be watered well after candling.



Figure 1 The two *Pinus nigra* that we worked on.

The other task which is carried out weekly at RBG Kew is maintenance of the gravel. The granite chips are much larger than the ones at Cowden, so a leaf blower can be used to remove leaves and other debris from the gravel. Consequently the rake used to draw patterns into the gravel also has a much heavier head, see Figure 2. The depth of the gravel pattern can also be altered by adjusting the length of the rake teeth.



Figure 2 Wooden rake used for the gravel.

The design patterns in the gravelled areas are not fixed and are often changed, see Figures 3 and 4. This is also common in traditional gardens in Japan, where the designs sometimes reflect the change in season.



Figure 3 Chequer board pattern in the largest gravel area.



Figure 4 Smaller gravelled area in The Japanese Landscape, after I raked it.

It was great to get a sustained period of work in this established Japanese garden. Although the pine needle thinning was quite monotonous, it was good to get an appreciation of the sheer amount of time and dedication it takes to maintain trained trees to a high standard. Bearing in mind this is only part of the annual maintenance cycle, it is no small undertaking to train conifers in this manner. This was a very useful lesson to learn for work planning at Cowden Japanese Garden.

### 3.2 Garden visits

#### Kyoto Garden, Holland Park

This is a small Japanese garden within a larger public park. It was designed and built in 1992 as a celebration of the Japan Festival being held in London in the same year, see Figure 5. The Deputy Head Gardener, Mark Sinclair, showed me round the area and gave me some insights into the challenges of managing such a space. It is a very popular part of the garden, in the couple of hours I was there, there was never a time when it was unoccupied. One of the key challenges is managing the public and restricting their movements to the paths. To this end all of the grassed and planted areas are fenced off in some way, albeit quite attractively, see Figures 6 & 7.



Figure 5 Kyoto Garden view



Figure 6 Post and rope path boundary



Figure 7 Bamboo hoop path boundary

Given the current climate of funding for public parks, Mark admitted that this area has not had as much attention as previously. It really does require regular pruning to keep the shrubs to the correct shape and looking appropriately kempt. I was particularly interested in the choice of *Pinus* species for training. In this garden *Pinus strobus* is used at the entrance (no photo), because it is reliable at budding back after pruning. *Pinus pumila* is also used, although this is harder to train because of its growth habit, see Figure 8.



Figure 8 *Pinus pumila* showing typical wavy growth pattern, and close up of needles

### The Japanese Landscape, Royal Botanic Garden Kew

This area was designed by Professor Fukahara (the same designer involved in the restoration at Cowden), and completed in 1996. It is built around a replica of the Chokushi-Mon gate, which was moved to Kew following the Japan British Exhibition held in White City, London in 1910. It contains a number of different elements of Japanese gardens including a dry stone stroll garden, and a tea garden, adapted from garden styles popular in the Momoyama period when the gate was constructed, see Figure 9.



Figure 9 Looking down the slope to the dry garden

Compared to Cowden Japanese garden this landscape is much more richly planted, although compared to a traditional British garden the plant palette is still very limited. I particularly liked the use of similar leaf forms at different scales to create a striking visual impact, see Figure 10.



Figure 10 Rivers of *Liriope muscari* and *Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Nanus'

Plant leaf forms are used as a textural contrast to hard landscaping finishes, see Figures 11 & 12.



Figure 11 *Pachysandra terminalis* creating a block edge to granite paving



Figure 12 *Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Nana' softening an irregular stone path.

Japanese style roof garden, Brunei Building, SOAS

This small garden was created in 2001, by a Peter Swift, a British garden designer with experience of adapting Japanese design principles to British gardens. The planting is minimal and restricted to *Wisteria* over an arbour and lemon thyme used in a chequer board pattern, see Figure 13. This is an intimate enclosed space, which I visited on a dull December afternoon. Although the area was poorly maintained, it still retains an air of calmness.



Figure 13 Japanese roof garden on the Brunei Gallery at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

#### 4. Conclusions and application of knowledge

Practical applications of the knowledge gained during the training include;

- Consideration of plant foliage as a contribution to textural contrast in planting schemes in Japanese gardens.
- In a planting scheme think large numbers of one species, rather than large numbers of species.
- The crucial importance of attention to detail in garden maintenance.
- As a public garden, the control of where visitors are allowed to walk will have to be given consideration, if plants and structures are not going to be damaged. People will walk anywhere for a good photo given the chance.
- The importance of factoring in enough time to prune and train conifers within the garden, at the appropriate time periods through the year. Candling in particular is a very time specific activity.

It was great to gain both practical experience and to visit other established Japanese gardens. I would not have been able to do either of these things without funding from The Hardy Plant Society. It has introduced me to a wealth of new contacts, and as a sole gardener it has made me appreciate that there is a network of people locally and internationally who are passionate about this subject and willing to share their knowledge and skills.

どうもありがとう

Thank you HPS!