



## THE JOHN P. HUMES JAPANESE STROLL GARDEN AT FIFTY

Inspired fifty years ago by one couple's passionate reaction to gardens in Japan, the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden offers visitors a transcendent journey. Open to the public each weekend from late April through October, the four-acre site blends Japanese garden elements and Asian plants with the native Long Island woodland. Visitors are guided through twists and turns to a "mountain peak" before descending gently to a peaceful pondside setting. Stephen A. Morrell, a renowned designer of public and private Japanese gardens, reflects on the garden's origins, his personal journey working with the garden for thirty years, and the garden's future.

# REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY

By Stephen A. Morrell

Photography by Chelsea Stickel  
of *Garden Design* magazine

## The garden's journey began

in 1960 when John and Jean Humes traveled to Japan and were inspired by the beauty of its ancient gardens. When they returned, they decided to transform a two-acre corner of their Mill Neck, New York estate into a Japanese garden. They imported a tea house as the garden's centerpiece and engaged Douglas and Joan DeFaya, a first-generation Japanese-American couple, to develop the garden. For four years, the DeFayas, working with a local landscape contractor, carved the garden's paths into the hillside, setting stones by hand and planting the forest understory with a variety of shrubs and groundcovers. Remains from their original plantings—Hinoki cypress, laceleaf Japanese maple, weeping hemlock, and Katsura—can still be seen in the area surrounding the tea house.

## From private to public treasure

In 1969, John Humes was appointed ambassador to Austria, where he and his family lived until 1975. During this time, the garden was overrun by invasive plants. In 1978, encouraged by landscape designer Francois Goffinet, Humes began to explore the idea of not only restoring the garden but also opening it to the public. While studying at the New York Botanical Garden, I was introduced to Ambassador Humes due to my interest in Japanese gardens. He was a charming man, and I was fascinated by the garden and the opportunity to work there. In a letter to me in the spring of 1980, he wrote: "I hope your relationship with the garden lasts for many moons." It has.

As I began work full time at the garden in 1982, my decision that the garden best represented the Japanese stroll garden





style provided a focus for its future development. I felt strongly that the garden's forest setting should be emphasized and that its aesthetic direction should enhance the natural character of the site. Much editing was undertaken, removing juniper, pine, and spruce not appropriate for the woodland. Seed-grown Japanese maples were planted in random groupings along the path so that they appear to be part of the native flora, with native and Asian herbaceous plants as groundcovers and accent plants.

In the fall of 1983, I made my first trip to Japan for a three-month study of gardens, traditional Japanese arts, and plant collecting. This experience helped me to develop a greater vision for the Humes garden and its interpretation for

the public. After years of preparation, the garden opened to the public in the spring of 1985. John Humes passed away that autumn; leaving his wonderful gift of the garden for all to enjoy.

*The John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden offers a variety of educational programs from guided horticultural tours to demonstrations of the Japanese tea ceremony and exhibits of ikebana, bonsai, bamboo flute music, and other Japanese arts.*





### **A journey through space, time, and aesthetics**

The defining feature of the Humes garden is its path, inspired by the intimacy of a mountain trail. I chose a Buddhist metaphor for life's journey as the theme: the ascent up the mountain and the twists and turns of the path represent the process of self transcendence. Arriving at the mountain peak, the view is unobstructed; "enlightened being" has been realized. The path down the mountain represents the return to the valley and the actualization of "enlightened being" in life. The journey ends at the tea house by a pond, offering a peaceful retreat from worldly affairs.

The spatial dynamics of the path not only dictate the garden experience but allow for terracing to both control erosion and maximize the use of space. The asymmetrical progression up the path creates an experience that unfolds one step at a time, heightening the sense of journey and discovery. Existing land contours and the garden's major structural elements—old-growth trees—determined the direction of the path. Expansion and contraction of the path and the use of

stepping stones encourage both movement and pause. Transitional stages of the garden experience are marked by three rustic gateways that provide sheltered vantage points and convey passage.

The garden's plant palette is simple, with plants repeated throughout the garden to convey a sense of naturalness. Plants are used more for the emotional response they evoke and their relation to the whole rather than for their individual beauty. The garden's native forest remains mainly intact, but selective editing creates greater visual access and an immediate and direct connection to its distinct form. Just enough spontaneous growth is allowed to respect the ecological processes of the site. The understory is composed of a mix of native trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants and their Asian counterparts.

Flowers are used sparingly to add subtle accents and seasonal grace notes. Signature Asian plants provide the most significant Japanese touch. Bamboo, Japanese cedar, Hinoki cypress, Japanese maple, ferns, and mosses grow throughout the garden; moss is the most important groundcover, providing continuity, depth, and a sense of age. Shades of green are

emphasized and evergreens given precedence as they provide year-round structure, depth, and a sense of tranquility.

### The journey forward

John Humes made some provisions for the garden in his estate plans, but by the late 1980s, it became clear that we needed to raise funds and secure management to continue to open the garden to the public. In 1990, I began working with the Garden Conservancy and established a formal management agreement, which continues to this day. In 1996, a matching grant from the Japan World Exposition Commemorative Fund made possible the restoration of the pond and waterfall and construction of a wall along Oyster Bay Road.

Over the years, the garden has received more than 50,000 visitors, offered classes and exhibitions focusing on traditional Japanese arts, and conducted tours and tea ceremony demonstrations. Support from the Freeman Foundation enabled me to offer garden fellowships and establish an outreach program serving hundreds of students since 1999. Many gardeners have helped nurture the garden over the

years, often going on to pursue careers in horticulture and garden design. My current gardener, Mary Schmutz, stands out for her ten-year commitment to, and passion for, the garden.

The garden has touched many lives. It has embraced mine. Looking forward, I see a most exciting time in the garden's history. After fifty years, the condition of the garden is exceptional, its beauty striking, its programs rich and varied. It's a jewel poised to be appreciated by many more visitors, members, volunteers, and supporters. Please come and experience the journey for yourself.

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### Preservation Plans

As the Humes garden celebrates its 50th anniversary, 2010 is an appropriate time to reflect on the past, look to the future, and rededicate our efforts to the long-term preservation of this remarkable garden. For more information, please call the Garden Conservancy at 845.265.2029.

### *Gyotaku—The Art of Japanese Fish Painting*



August 14 - September 26, 2010  
The summer exhibition at the Humes garden will feature Long Island artist Jack Schwartz.

*Gyotaku* (gee-yo-tah'-koo) is a traditional Japanese art form developed by fishermen about 200 years ago as way of recording their catch. *Gyotaku* means "fish rubbing."

# PLEASE BECOME A MEMBER OF THE HUMES GARDEN

When you visit the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden, please consider becoming a member. Your tax-deductible donation of \$50 or more entitles you to free admission to the garden throughout the season; special invitations to events, exhibits, and programs at the garden; and discounts at our plant sales.

Donations from individual members, foundations, and corporations, together with a modest grant from New York State's Environmental Protection Fund, support the interpretation, programs, and maintenance of the Stroll Garden. While members of the Humes family remain involved through the Humes Japanese Garden Foundation, support from this source covers only part of the garden's annual budget. The involvement and investment of the community on Long Island's North Shore is vital to the garden's continued operation.

Please join the members who treasure this jewel of a garden and the work of its dedicated staff. The Humes garden is managed as a Preservation Project of the Garden Conservancy. If you are not able to visit the garden this season, please send your donation to the following address:

John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden  
c/o The Garden Conservancy  
P.O. Box 219, Cold Spring, NY 10516

*Please write Humes Japanese Garden in the memo line on your check. You will receive a receipt for your tax-deductible donation.*

**For more information** about further ways you can help preserve the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden, please contact the Garden Conservancy's Development Department at 845.265.2029 or [info@gardenconservancy.org](mailto:info@gardenconservancy.org).

## **Directions to the Humes Garden**

The garden is located on the North Shore of Long Island, about 26 miles from Manhattan and one mile from Planting Fields Arboretum and the Long Island Railroad's Oyster Bay Line. Taxis are available.

**By car from west:** Take I-495/Long Island Expressway to Exit 39N/Glen Cove Road. Follow Glen Cove Road north to Route 25A/Northern Boulevard. Turn right and continue past C. W. Post University on the right, past Route 107 to the next traffic light at Wolver Hollow Road. The Old Brookville Police Station is on the left. Turn left,

and follow Wolver Hollow Road to the "T." Turn right onto Chicken Valley Road. Pass Planting Fields Arboretum on right and continue straight through yellow blinking light and continue one half mile to Dogwood Lane. Turn right. Parking is immediately on the right.

**From the east:** Take I-495/Long Island Expressway to Exit 41N to Route 106N to Route 25A/Northern Boulevard. Turn left onto Route 25A and follow to the second traffic light. Old Brookville Police Station is on the right. Turn right onto Wolver Hollow Road. Proceed as directed above.