



CHAPTER 3

IN PRAISE OF EDO GARDENS

“Well, well, I see you, too, have been invited!”

“As have you. You look as though you are enjoying yourself today.”

“Indeed I am! The autumn foliage is in its glory, and the weather is exquisite . . .”

“It’s a special honor to be invited to such a garden party at this time of year, don’t you think?”

Chatting while walking along the garden path are a physician patronized by the main residence (*kami yashiki* 上屋敷) of the Mito 水戸 domain and a direct retainer (*hatamoto* 旗本)¹ of the Tokugawa shogunate.

“Her Ladyship is a very skillful and gregarious hostess.”

“Yes, she loves a good time and has such a delightful wit.”

“Well, look at that. If that isn’t a soba stall over there!”

A stand has been set up, encircled with woven-reed sunscreens. At the back hangs a blind with a sign reading “kamiyo soba” 神代そば (“age of the gods” soba). The paper lantern on the stall has something quite lengthy written on it. Upon closer scrutiny, it says:

役味は山田のおろち、大根醤油の風味は天の浮橋

Yakumi wa Yamata no orochi, daikon shōyu no fūmi wa Ama no Ukihashi

The condiment is grated radish from mountain fields, while the flavor of soy sauce is sweet. (The sentence can also be interpreted: “The condiment is the Eight-headed Monster Serpent, while the flavor of soy sauce is the Floating Bridge of Heaven.)

“If the soba buckwheat noodles are from the age of the gods, then it’s quite amusing to call the mountain-field (*yamata*) grated radish (*oroshi daikon*) condiment the ‘Yamata no orochi,’ that mythological eight-headed (*yamata* 八岐) monster serpent (*orochi* 大蛇). And so we see the soba dipping sauce is of the sweet (*ama-i* 甘い)/heavenly (*ama* 天) flavor.”

“Delightful. For a daimyo’s wife, the atmosphere is certainly warm and informal.”

“With Her Ladyship, it is always this way. I am extremely fond of these garden parties she gives.”

“Look, there is a poem hanging on the stall. Hmm, what does it say? . . .”

1 Defined as shogunate vassals with an income of less than 10,000 *koku* a year and given the privilege of appearing directly before the shogun.



Figure 3-1. Koishikawa Kōrakuen in spring, with Tokyo Dome in the background. Photograph: Shirahata Yōzaburō, 2009.

やわらかにかみよしそばはおのずから高間が原にとどまりにけり

Yawaraka ni | kamiyoshi soba wa | onozukara | Takama-ga-hara ni | todomari ni keru

Soft and resilient, ‘age of the gods’ soba will lift you up of its own power to the High Plain of Heaven.”

“I see, the verse evokes the double entendre of the word *kamiyo-shi*, which can be taken to mean ‘easy to chew’ or ‘age of the gods.’”

“The pun juxtaposes *Takama-ga-hara* [High Plain of Heaven; *hara* 原 = plain] and *hara* 腹 [=stomach]—the pleasure of the stomach evoked with the word for the heavenly plain—saying that the soba digests most gently . . . Dear me, one might think it quite admirable if found in a soba shop in the town, but for a daimyo’s lady, it does seem a bit lacking in taste.”

Although the two characters presented here are fictional, the event they were attending was historical. The time was the autumn of 1828; the place was Koishikawa Kōrakuen 小石川後樂園, the garden preserved even today next door to the massive white-roofed Tokyo Dome baseball stadium (Figure 3-1). According to the domain history *Mito kinen* 水戸紀年:

On the twenty-seventh day of the tenth month, Her Ladyship (*Goshuden* 御守殿) invited physicians in the service of the House and others to view the Kōrakuen garden.²

“Her Ladyship” is Princess Mine 峰 (1800–1853), the thirteenth child of shogun Tokugawa Ienari. It was the fourteenth year since she had married Tokugawa Narinobu 斉脩 (1797–1829), the lord of the Mito domain.

Mito kinen uses the words “ordered” (*meizeraru* 命ぜらる) to view the garden, sounding quite stern, but in fact it seems to have been more like a relaxed and pleasant “invitation,” so perhaps it is not overstepping bounds to describe it as a “garden party.” Entertainments like this were often quite grand in scale and involved considerable time and money in their preparations, which were aimed at enhancing the refinement and enjoyment of the occasion as already detailed above:

There were amusing and tasteful contrivances of different kinds around the garden. First, there was a temporary stand, enclosed by reed curtains. On its back curtain hung a sign saying “kamiyo soba,” and the paper lantern at the front explained that the condiments included “mountain-field” grated radish and dipping sauce made with sweet-flavored soy sauce, and there was a poem that said . . .

Also according to *Mito kinen*:

In another spot was a stall offering *chazuke* 茶漬 [boiled rice doused with hot tea], which also indulged the amusement of puns.

三菜茶漬

アメツチノヒラケシ中ニ人ノメス茶漬ハケニモ三茶トシレ

Sansai chazuke

Ame tsuchi no / hirakeshi naka ni / hito no mesu / chazuke wake ni mo / sancha to shire

Sansai chazuke

With the heavens and the earth drawing apart,³ one should know there are *sansai* even in the *chazuke* people eat.⁴

Instead of simply setting up a stall to serve *chazuke*, the hostess used her imagination and wit to entertain guests and enhance the pleasures of the experience. The flavoring of the *chazuke*, which is *sansai* 山菜 (edible wild plants from the hills) evokes other words pronounced *sansai* such as “three powers” (三才, that is, heaven, earth, and human beings or, in short, the whole universe or creation), “three calamities” (三災, specifically flood, fire, and war), “three epochs” (三際, 三世, past, present, and future), and so on.

2 *Mito kinen*, p. 644.

3 According to Japanese myth, the heavens and the earth were once one.

4 *Mito kinen*, p. 645.

In addition to these *soba* and *chazuke* stalls offering plain fare, tea was also served in a formal and properly appointed tea ceremony. Here, too, the calligraphy hanging in the tokonoma and the utensils employed in the ceremony were chosen to be witty and enjoyable. The hostess substituted a rough clay burner (*shichirin* 七輪) for a portable tea-ceremony hearth (*furo* 風炉)⁵ and made the sweets out of sweet potatoes (*satsuma-imo* 薩摩芋) as a favored treat of the season, all part of her thoroughgoing efforts to evoke a rustic atmosphere and introduce the unexpected in every detail of the entertainment.

Her Ladyship had another occasion to exercise her ingenuity in the following month, when a group of ladies-in-waiting from Edo castle was invited to Kōrakuen for a banquet:

The ladies of the Nishi no maru 西丸 were invited to the garden by Her Ladyship. His Lordship (*Kō* 公) called on Shiga Risuke 志賀理介 to write something on the hanging lantern that would make the ladies smile. Risuke immediately wrote about the origin of the word *dango* 団子 [dumplings], and [the lantern with this story] was hung on a *dango* stand [in the garden].⁶

Preparing poems that would make others laugh, the hostess invited the guests to enjoy and entertain themselves.

The next year, 1829, *Mito kinen* makes note of a *hanami* (flower viewing) banquet at Kōrakuen on the fifteenth day of the third month in the cherry-blossom season:

The women in the service of the residence were invited by Her Ladyship to a *hanami* and banquet in Kōrakuen garden. His Lordship wrote lyrics to *noh* chants commemorating the event, and Mitani Sōbei 三谷総兵衛 sang them for the pleasure of His Lordship.⁷

The grandest garden entertainment at Kōrakuen that is recorded was held in 1702 during the cultural ferment of the Genroku era, some 130 years earlier than the above occasions. The guest of honor was Keishōin, the mother of the ruling shogun, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi. In as much as she was the favorite of third shogun Iemitsu 家光 (1604–1651) and the mother of the current shogun, tremendous care was put into the preparations, which included major reworking of the garden appointments.

Daimyo thus seem to have taken whatever event came along as the occasion to plan banquets and parties, and their gardens were actively and dynamically used for these entertainments. Some were rather quiet affairs, for a small number of guests who enjoyed themselves in elegant and refined ways, but not a few were large-scale gala parties with many guests in which the proceedings could become quite boisterous.

5 A *shichirin* is an earthenware portable brazier for household use that became widespread in the mid-Edo period. A *furo* is a portable brazier of more refined design, usually with an opening making the fire visible from the front, that is used expressly for the tea ceremony.

6 *Mito kinen*, p. 645.

7 *Mito kinen*, p. 645.

Gardens in Decline?

The laughter and gaiety that once filled Kōrakuen make it all the more puzzling that gardens of the Edo period—or, to be more precise, gardens built in the city of Edo—should enjoy so little esteem among modern-day specialists.

The Japanese stroll-style garden stands out among garden designs in Japan or elsewhere. Pleasantly winding paths climb hills and descend into valleys, meandering past waterfalls and through groves of trees, and all one needs to do to enjoy the scenery is to follow the trail as it presents one pleasing scene after another. Stroll gardens readily capture the appreciation of visitors from overseas, who invariably come away from the experience with a favorable impression. Specialists on Japanese gardens, too, generally agree on the merits of the style.

The vast majority of daimyo gardens extant today are of the stroll style, yet strangely, these gardens tend to be rated much lower than examples in Kyoto, especially by experts and garden historians. Perhaps it is because the experiences offered by daimyo gardens—crossing a pond over strategically placed stepping stones, or admiring the view from atop a hill—are of a simple, uncomplicated kind that appeals to the generalist or layperson. Perhaps such broad appeal seems annoying from the experts' point of view.

Mori Osamu 森蘊 (1905–1988), one of the foremost authorities on Japanese garden history, calls the early Edo period the “third golden age” of Japanese gardens.⁸ In making this statement, however, Mori seems to have chiefly in mind the gardens of Kyoto, for example Katsura detached palace. “Kyoto remained the center for gardens during the early Edo period,” he writes, asserting that it was only after designers such as Kobori Enshū went to work in Edo that proper gardens began to be built in that part of Japan.⁹ Clearly of the opinion that Edo, in its early days, did not have gardens on a par with those in Kyoto, Mori argues that it was not until the middle of the Edo period that the center of garden culture moved from Kyoto to Edo. His apparent belief that this shift corrupted the world of Japanese garden design influences his entire analysis, as exemplified by the following:

Another distinguishing characteristic of this age [the Edo period] is the publication of many garden-related books catering to the spread of popular interest in gardens and made possible by advances in printing technology. It is often said that increased popularity is the root of *decline*, and it cannot be denied that true artistry in garden design was lost [as gardens] fell into a kind of *recreational hobby* (*yūgiteki shumi* 遊技の趣味).¹⁰ (emphasis added)

A much-respected scholar, Mori worked at the Nara National Research Institute of Cultural Properties (Nara Bunkazai Kenkyūjo 奈良文化財研究所) for many years and lectured on Japanese garden history at several institutes of higher learning, including the national universities. The above passage was written relatively early in his career when he was formulating his own comprehensive overview of Japanese garden history. His attitude, however, remained largely the same even in later writings:

8 Mori 1964, p. 48.

9 Mori 1964, p. 48.

10 Mori 1964, p. 48.

While the great *development* (*hattatsu* 発達) and proliferation of gardens during this period were certainly to be applauded, regrettably the declining quality of the planners, designers, and artisans involved with gardens often resulted in designs and forms of expression that left much to be desired.¹¹ (emphasis added)

The passage could be construed as contradicting itself, saying first that gardens greatly *developed* (i.e., advanced) during the Edo period and then declaring that the inferior quality of the people involved was responsible for their decline. If we take both statements at face value, we would have to conclude that the development of gardens proceeded simultaneously with the decline of their designers, a rather peculiar situation.

Of course, it is possible to take “hattatsu” in a quantitative sense, in which case Mori can be understood as saying that as gardens grew in number they correspondingly declined in quality. Decline in “quality” probably means “declining quality as art.” But is that true? Are the gardens of the mid- to late Edo-period really so wanting from the artistic point of view? Even if they cannot be valued highly in artistic terms, does that necessarily equal “decline”? Going a step further and allowing that they did fall into a “recreational hobby,” is that necessarily such a bad thing for gardens?

Support for the Decline Theory. The garden designer and historian Shigemori Mirei 重森三玲 (1896–1975) is widely considered one of the foremost Japanese garden critics to have worked outside academia. Shigemori published the monumental 26-volume *Nihon teienshi zukan* 日本庭園史図鑑 from 1936 to 1939, later reworking it into the 35-volume *Nihon teienshi taikai* 日本庭園史大系 (1973–1976) in collaboration with his son Kanto 完途.

Like Mori, Shigemori tended to look down on Edo gardens. “Although large-scale pond gardens became strangely popular among the daimyo of this period, their size was an ostentatious show that advertised the superiority of one’s domain over others, not the natural outcome of efforts to create a highly artistic garden,” he writes.¹² Clearly he, too, takes “artistry” as the standard by which gardens should be evaluated. Elsewhere he states, “While some garden designers of this period . . . are well known, many were daimyo who dallied in the work with only amateur knowledge, so it was inevitable that gardens during that period should gradually decline.”¹³

Mori and Shigemori differed greatly. Mori upheld late-Heian period garden ideals of the kind outlined in *Sakuteiki*, the earliest existing treatise on gardens, and lionized the Katsura villa garden as the surviving embodiment of those ideals. Shigemori, meanwhile, considered the dry landscape (*karesansui*) gardens of the late Kamakura to the Muromachi periods, with their focus on stone arrangements, to be the epitome of garden styles. Thus one admired imperial elegance, and the other, Zen abstraction. The two men followed vastly different approaches to research as well as ideals of what a garden should be, and indeed did not even correspond with each other. Yet somehow both agree in disparaging Edo gardens, a tendency that most later scholars have continued to support.

11 Mori 1984, p. 24.

12 Shigemori and Shigemori 1972, p. 5.

13 Shigemori and Shigemori 1972, p. 5.

An Assessment Based on Function. These negative evaluations of Edo gardens are the products of a set of standards based solely on design and style. They assess gardens similarly to painting, sculpture, or other genres of art. They determine artistry only by whether a particular garden *looks* good or bad; they focus only on the creators without taking into account the perspective of the users.

But gardens are also places to walk in, listening to chirping birds and rippling streams, as well as to sit, perhaps while enjoying tea or sake. It is a waste to limit them to the narrow confines of visual art. If we were to adopt a more comprehensive perspective, we would arrive at a quite different conclusion.

Tatsui Matsunosuke 龍居松之助 (1884–1961) was one of the few Japanese garden historians to acknowledge the merits of Edo gardens. “The world of garden design flourished enormously during the Edo period,” he wrote, noting that the period was a time of “the creation of countless freely designed gardens.”¹⁴

In making his evaluations, Tatsui was careful to incorporate perspectives other than the visual. He saw gardens as venues offering a wide variety of experiences, and he adopted the term *jitsuyō* 実用 (practicality) to denote those functions, for example the hosting of tea ceremonies and entertainments. By Tatsui’s reckoning, daimyo gardens excellently served the purposes of *jitsuyō*, much more excellently than gardens of other eras:

[Edo gardens] accomplished much that was worthy of note. It was a time when gardens were infused with all sorts of practically oriented tastes, including the Chinese Confucian taste incorporated into Kōrakuen by Tokugawa Mitsukuni 徳川光圀, the archaeological and curatorial tastes introduced by Matsudaira Sadanobu 松平定信 into his Rikuen 六園 garden, and the literary associations furnished in such gardens as Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu’s Rikugien. Also significant was the emergence of public parks maintained for the health, pleasure, and welfare of the samurai class, for example Matsudaira Sadanobu’s Nanko 南湖 park and Tokugawa Nariaki’s 徳川斉昭 Kairakuen 偕楽園.¹⁵

Garden historians other than Tatsui are in accord in their negative evaluations of Edo gardens. Scholars working in architectural and cultural history, by contrast, are much more appreciative. They consider Edo gardens to be innovative in the design of space and show great interest in what their functions reveal of the nature of Edo society.

A just appraisal of daimyo gardens would accomplish much for the sake of a truer appreciation of Edo-period gardens. The daimyo garden is, after all, the leading garden style to have emerged during that era.

Design and Style. People today see nothing wrong with fences or signs telling them to keep away from the grass and shrubbery and warning them to be careful around ponds and streams. They assume they should never eat or drink, much less make merry in such places, so all they ever really do is look around. Even people who do not necessarily condemn the idea of picnicking in a garden would never

14 Tatsui 1942, pp. 55–56.

15 Tatsui 1942, p. 56.

dream of using it to hold a party in any way they liked. Indeed, nowadays it is virtually impossible to experience a stroll garden as it was truly meant to be enjoyed. Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that people have fostered a one-sided view of daimyo gardens.

From that perspective, Edo-period gardens have long been disparaged. Certainly they may lack the austere, intense qualities of Zen rock gardens. And they may not display the highly condensed, taut design of these and other Kyoto gardens, particularly those dating from the Muromachi period, with their stern forms that rivet our gaze. If anything, daimyo gardens exude an atmosphere that is relaxing and soothing.

This book focuses on the social functions of daimyo gardens, for example their role in entertaining the shogun, other daimyo, and family retainers. Such an approach is indisputably important, having been too long ignored by garden critics. But putting daimyo gardens into their proper place in history requires us to address their visual qualities as well. While I am convinced that it is fundamentally misguided to judge daimyo gardens solely on their visual merits, the truth is that they do not suffer in comparison with other gardens in Japanese history even when considered by those standards.

True, there have been defenders who noted that daimyo gardens were too expansive to maintain a focused, tightly integrated overall composition. They are, it is argued, collections of discrete parts that individually display a well-integrated, high-quality design. But this constitutes only a partial defense that seeks neither to justify the overall design and style of daimyo gardens nor to actively assert their value.

The issue of design and style is important not only to defend daimyo gardens against attacks on their value as art for visual appreciation. Rethinking design and style means resuscitating the relationship between form and function in gardens. What I aim to do here, in other words, is to reevaluate the very perspectives and standards by which gardens have long been judged.

Established standards have been weighted far too heavily toward abstract designs and non-everyday forms. But is it valid to claim that the further removed something is from the needs of everyday life, the more refined its design and function? If we consider the essential roots of design, an excessive focus on visual appreciation or abstraction would seem to stray from the true purpose of design, not the other way around.

Features of Daimyo Gardens

With the above in mind, the following overview of the characteristic features of daimyo gardens will consider both their utilitarian and aesthetic aspects, investigating what designs were devised to satisfy what needs, and what goals informed their style. Such perspectives are sure to inspire a new outlook on gardens and to prompt a reassessment of the true worth of daimyo gardens.

Ponds and Lawns. A daimyo garden almost always has at least one pond, called in Japanese *sensui* 泉水 or sometimes *chisen* 池泉. Particularly large ponds are termed *daisensui* 大泉水 or *daichisen* 大池泉, both meaning “great pond.” Some gardens do not have specialized names for their ponds, so that, for example, the two ponds of Edo’s Toyamasō were simply distinguished as *gosensui* 御泉水 (pond) and *kami no gosensui* 上の御泉水 (upper pond), respectively. Other gardens have multiple ponds with names derived from their

location or some Chinese reference, for example the six ponds—Hokko 北湖 (north pond), Seiko 西湖 (west pond), Nanko 南湖 (south pond), Fuyōchi 芙蓉池 (lotus pond), Kansuichi 涵水池 (overflowing pond), and Gun'ōchi 群鴨池 (“duck gathering” pond)—at Ritsurin'en 栗林園 in Kagawa prefecture. A single large pond takes up the main portion of both Jōjuen 成趣園 (also Suizenji kōen 水前寺公園) in Kumamoto 熊本 and Genkyūen 玄宮園 in Hikone 彦根; Rikugien and Koishikawa Kōrakuen in Tokyo, too, are built around a central pond.

Walking around a daimyo garden typically brings one upon certain places where the view will suddenly open up. A pond is such a place. Nothing impedes the view over a pond, which creates an atmosphere of open spaciousness.

A lawn is yet another important device for adding a sense of expansiveness to a garden. Lawns extend as surfaces, with the green grass stretching out against blue sky. Lawns began to play an important role in Japanese gardens only with the emergence of the Edo daimyo garden. The turning point came with the growth in demand for spacious outdoor surfaces where many people could gather in a festive atmosphere.

Lawns are mentioned in the ancient poetry anthology *Man'yōshū*, suggesting that they existed in some form in Japan by at least the seventh or eighth century. But nothing specifically cites their use in gardens. Nor is it likely that lawns had any great role to play in the gardens of the subsequent Heian period, since at that time, flat outdoor surfaces were mainly set aside for ceremonial purposes and were covered with earth or white gravel.

The Jesuit missionary Luis Fróis (1532–1597), who was active in Japan during the Muromachi period, remarks that unlike Europeans who relax on their lawns, Japanese insist on pulling out every blade of grass or weed they see growing in their gardens.¹⁶ Fróis probably had in mind relatively small Kyoto gardens, perhaps rock gardens. Weeds growing on artificial hills or around stone arrangements would certainly ruin the scenery of such a garden.

Pre-Edo Japanese gardens tolerated and cultivated the presence of moss, but never included stretches of lawn. For a long time, earth or white gravel remained the only options for covering open surfaces, moss being entirely unsuited for that purpose. Daimyo gardens were the first to develop a design and style that could incorporate lawns to best effect. They succeeded in introducing into Japanese gardens a new kind of space fit for active pleasure, which, by opening up a view of the sky above, was moreover attractive.

Open Vistas. “Openness” was the new visual concept in garden building introduced by the gardens of the Edo period, most notably daimyo gardens. The practice of strolling around gardens developed to take full advantage of this openness, leading in turn to the stroll style.

If one gazes out at a garden from inside a building without moving around, openness could be quite tiresome. But in daimyo gardens, sections of pond or lawn where the view suddenly opens up after dark groves and narrow, rustic-looking trails lend variety to the scene and add pleasure and

16 Fróis 1991 (1585).

excitement to the stroll. Daimyo gardens call on visitors to go out and move their bodies, which can be stimulating mentally and spiritually as well as physically.

Okayama Kōrakuen 岡山後楽園 (to be discussed in Chapter 7) is one of the leading examples of a daimyo garden with extensive lawns. By turning its level, somewhat monotonous terrain into a grassy expanse, this garden on an island in the Asahi 旭 river succeeds in heightening the pleasures offered by its view. The feeling is further enhanced by sweeping garden paths, gently rolling hills, and the borrowed scenery (*shakkei* 借景) of distant mountains.

Nearly all the gardens built for the residences of Meiji-era statesmen also had wide stretches of lawn before the main house that could be used to hold outdoor parties and entertainments. The design of Okayama Kōrakuen seems to prefigure the amenities for garden entertainments that became prevalent much later during Japan's modern period. Even from a present-day perspective, the garden is such as to make one wish to hold an outdoor banquet or party there.

Suizenji park in Kumamoto is another good example of a former daimyo garden where the pond and lawn combine to create a free and open prospect. Originally a retreat named Jōjuen that was owned by the Hosokawa family of Higo-domain lords, the garden acquired its current name after being opened to the public during the Meiji era. But even before that time, it had been designed along lines very similar to modern public parks. The view from the tea house overlooking the pond's wide waters, the graceful grass-covered hill in the shape of Mt. Fuji—such features make it perfect not only for strolling but for a wide variety of pleasures amid an open landscape encompassing the beauty of both water and grass.

Beauty and Functionality. All daimyo gardens share a bright, easy atmosphere that invites visitors to freely revel in the pleasures they offer. Daimyo gardens were to be used instead of merely gazed at, and their style features complemented their functions. They were governed by what Tatsui Matsunosuke termed “practicality.”

Gardens of previous eras, especially the Kamakura and Muromachi, were centered on stone arrangements in which each form and feature had significance and could withstand close independent scrutiny. In daimyo gardens, by contrast, individual features were incidental details or visual accouterments of larger views or landscapes. They did not assert themselves but blended into the whole, offering occasional points of interest to visitors strolling in the garden. The features, if examined separately in search of their artistic or aesthetic qualities, may seem to some to be unsophisticated and roughly made. Yet they are the way they are precisely because daimyo gardens are above all intended to be entered and walked around in.

A case in point is Rikugien, which is designed around themes taken from Japanese poetry (see Chapter 5). Kokoro no izumi 心泉 (heart/spirit spring), Kokoro no hashi 心橋 (heart/spirit bridge), Tamamo no iso 玉藻磯 (“ball moss” beach), Yūhi no oka 夕日岡 (“evening sun” hill), Susono no ume 裾野梅 (“hill foot” plum tree), Kataonami 片男波 (“higher waves” beach), Hana tou komichi 尋芳径 (“flower seeking” path): the very names given to the garden's sights are made up of long, rolling phrases that draw on common motifs in Japanese poetry (although some features may also have had terser alternative names based on Chinese terms).

At the same time, Rikugien was not solely for strolling, as is clear from the descriptions of Keishōin's visit on pages 1–3. Even more significant was its function of providing social entertainment through refreshments offered in the course of tea, fair stalls erected on the grounds, or make-believe conversations with servants playacting as peasants or merchants. On such occasions, the sights visitors admired and appreciated while strolling would, once removed from the center of attention, revert to a fitting backdrop for socializing and banqueting pleasures.

Each daimyo garden has a distinct personality, whether it be Rikugien, centered on its eighty-eight sights derived from references to Japanese poetry, or Koishikawa Kōrakuen, featuring landscapes inspired by Chinese poetry and Confucian principles. While ostensibly devoted to the pursuit of cultivation and virtue, the gardens never lose their capacity to provide relaxation and pleasure. At the risk of some exaggeration, it may even be said that daimyo gardens have found a way to merge virtue with pleasure.