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Garden Profile



The Asia Garden at Furman University



The Asia Garden is serenely situated on the shore of 30-acre Furman Lake at Furman University. Three water bodies: two small ponds of differing sizes and a bog are strung together and edged by water plants, trees, shrubs, and perennials native to either Asia or South Carolina. The red maples (*Acer rubrum*) are of course North American indigenous plants and create spectacular shade for the landscaped spaces while the bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) adds a strong vertical edge to the garden. Cryptomeria (*C. japonica*), an Asian native, adds rough magnificence to the small space and has managed to hold its green color deep into the interior of the foliage, an unusual event for a large specimen.

Formerly known as The Japanese Garden, the roughly two-acre landscape is undergoing a Renaissance. One year ago Sheree Wright was hired as Senior Groundskeeper to participate in the special project and reconstruction of the popular space. Investment in the Asia Garden is spurred by Furman University's expanding Asian Studies program. United States donors and Asian University collaborators are all intent on building a world class Asian studies program for Furman students. And what better way to communicate culture than through the creation, maintenance and experience of an Asian garden? Asian studies and biology classes are frequent Asia Garden users. Furman's development office is currently designing a funding campaign that includes naming opportunities.

Phase one restoration involves the inner core of the landscape and includes three bodies of water (two ponds and a bog) and adjacent plantings. Mark Byington of Innocenti Webel is the lead designer. Innocenti Webel is a NY company with offices in Florida and South Carolina. *Making a Landscape of Continuity: The*

Practice of Innocenti and Webel is a book by Gary Hildebrand, adjunct professor for the Dept. of Landscape Architecture at Harvard University School of Design. Furman University is featured in the book as the campus landscape was originally designed by Innocenti and Webel. The book is published by Princeton Architectural Press/Harvard Graduate School of Design (1997) (<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/people/faculty/hilderbrand/pub.html>).

Mike Stoner of Stoner Landscaping, Taylors, SC is landscape contractor. One of the first tasks was to separate the water flow between Lake Furman and the Asia Garden. Three AquaScape pumps (one pumps 10,000 gallons per hour and two pump 7,500 gallons per hour) recirculate water for the waterfall, bog, and 250,000 gallon pond. The lined pond covers 6,500 square feet and is one of the largest man made ponds in the Southeast. Plant name tags are intentionally minimal at this time. Phase two development involves the outer rim of the landscape and will add more Chinese amenities to the garden as well as an educational kiosk. Another project that sits directly above the Asia Garden is called the Place of Peace. A Japanese temple was carefully deconstructed in Japan and reconstructed by Japanese artisans at Furman University.

Wright performs all daily horticulture tasks and may be found mowing the small mounds of zoysia turf, raking the pebble paths, pruning or dividing plants, or slipping into waders to hunt and remove string algae from the ponds. She arrives as 7:00 a.m. and leaves at 3:00 p.m. Unless of course, she is rerouted to give a garden tour or a pump fails or some other incident interferes with the normal routine. Staying late for the Asia Garden is not punishment due to the meditative quality of the garden. Wright reflects, "It's very peaceful. When you go in there, you experience quietude. You

hear the soothing sound of the waterfall as it flows over the rocks, you walk the winding pebble path surrounded by unusual plants." Over 100 different species have been installed in phase one.

Sheree Wright is a native New Yorker who spent 10 years working as Operations Liaison for Merrill Lynch in downtown Manhattan. Her family relocated to Greenville when her child was very young. The cost of living, Southern politeness, and the beauty of the area all called to her and her husband. After relocating, she focused on her love of plants and gardening and she became a Certified Master Gardener in 1999. She then went to work at Happy Plants Garden Center and Greenhouses in Easley and worked there until they went out of business last year. She is also a Consulting Rosarian with the American Rose Society and a member of the Greenville Rose Society. But her work at Furman in the Asia Garden is the best job yet. "I want to stay here until I die or retire," she cheerfully admits.

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Wright also acknowledges that the Furman University community makes work enjoyable. Her Special Projects work team includes Scott Sherman, Director of Campus Planning and Facilities Services; Bruce Fox, Horticulturist for Facilities Services (and a Clemson Horticulture graduate); Ed Davis; and Eugene Massey. This team is quick to respond if called. “The people here are fabulous. It’s a real team, if I need help, its there. There’s a rapport here, you can rely on other teams as well.” Additional work benefits include a fair benefits package and free tuition for employees’ children. Wright’s daughter, a future voice major, is quite grateful to her mother for choosing to work at Furman University.

Wright notes her task to create clear water by hunting string algae is quite an American chore. In Japan, apparently the green surface to the water is valued, not seen as an eyesore. Pruning Asian style is another new experience for Wright. She and four others invited a Japanese horticulturist to the campus to give a workshop where they learned the ins and outs of timing and technique for pruning some Asia natives. Wright is currently experimenting with pruning a Japanese red pine (*Pinus densifora* ‘Oculus Draconis’) into a cloud form. The Japanese apricot (*Prunus mume*) is also undergoing a serious pruning regimen. On the day of our interview Wright’s mail contained a specialty publication on Japanese tree and shrub pruning and she received the document much like someone who had just received notice that they had won the lottery.

Plants that spread rapidly are also a central feature of the Asia Garden. Several types of bamboo are plentiful. A concrete containment system 3’ deep and 8” wide is used to restrain the running types of bamboo *Sasa veitchii*, *Pleioblastus pygmeus*, and *P. pygmeus* var. *distichus*. Wright is the other force that constantly removes or divides rampant plants such as water mint (*Mentha aquatica*).

Environmentally sensitive practices are maintained in the Asia Garden

and “sustainable” is a campus grounds mantra. Staff moves about in electric operated Toro Workman vehicles. Organic fertilizers are used, even on the zoysia ‘Empire’ lawn. Rocks are swept to reduce the use of power equipment and weeds are mostly hand picked due to the close proximity of the water. Activated barley is used as an algaecide in the water along with AquaScape products SAB Extreme and EcoBlast. The irrigation system uses pond water and flows through misting nozzles that come on for 10 minutes every other day. Mulch is a special mix of fine textured material supplied

by Stoner Landscaping. Wright keeps a daily journal to record prune dates and appearances of pests and blooms. These records should enhance her efficiency in future years.

Visitors are welcome to the Asia Garden from dawn to dusk every day. The meditative aspects are best experienced in person, and there is a large rock to perch on, plenty of ornamental tree trunks to rest against, including stewartia (*Stewartia pseudocamellia*), and clouds of ethereal blue Japanese iris (*Iris ensata*) moving gently with the breeze at the water’s edge.

