



A Peaceful Oasis

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VAN CHRISTOU

Lethbridge's Nikka Yuko Centennial Garden is a monument to the contribution made to Canadian culture by Canadians of Japanese origin. How the garden came to be is a story of the miracle of good being brought out of the evil of injustice.

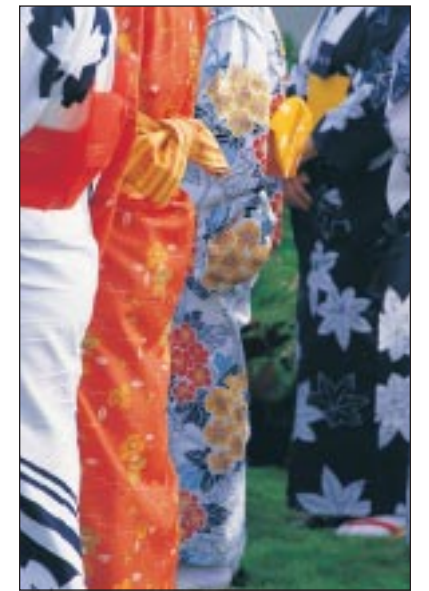
After the bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the 22,000 Japanese Canadians living on the British Columbia coast were relocated inland. Their property was confiscated; parents and children, husbands and wives were separated. In 1942, the Security Commission and Alberta's Social Credit government assigned more than 2,500 evacuees to pick sugar beets in southern Alberta. The work was back-breaking and living conditions were harsh. Still, after the war, most evacuees stayed and prospered, many coming to own the land on which they had laboured.

The 3.7-acre garden was built as Lethbridge's 1967 Centennial project. It was first the idea of the Japanese-Canadian community and later the publisher of the *Lethbridge Herald*, Cleo Mowers, and Kurt Steiner, manager of the Lethbridge Travel & Convention Bureau and an aficionado of Oriental culture, got involved. It became a total community project and a unifying force

— everyone wanted as authentic a Japanese garden as possible. One of the great Japanese landscape architects, Dr. Tadashi Kubo of Osaka University, was consulted. He assigned the design to his graduating class of 25 students, and the best of these was chosen.

Japanese in design, the garden is Canadian in plant choice. Hardy plants were substituted for the traditional Japanese choices. Instead of cherry trees, crabapples were used to similar effect — for blossoms in spring and bright red fruit later in the season. Other plants in the garden include Russian olive, *ginnala* maple, junipers, pines, spruce and many other evergreens. Some visitors are surprised at the relatively few flowers in the garden, but shades of green rather than riotous colour are more in keeping with its restful spirit. All buildings were constructed in Japan, taken apart, and shipped to Alberta. When they arrived, Van Christou felt compelled to pick up his camera to record the event.

"As they were reassembling the tea pavilion, I went over to watch," he recalls. "I was just blown away by the craftsmanship, the care with which everything was done, from putting the shingles on the roof, to planing the wood. They had these



Traditionally costumed young hostesses explain the garden's features to visitors.



old-fashioned wooden planes with a blade in a wooden block. They made one pass on the cypress — all the buildings are made of cypress wood — took the plane apart, sharpened the blade, put it together again and made the second pass, so the blade was exactly the same sharpness for every cut.

“Or these rocks in the garden: they were chosen very carefully first

of all, only certain shapes and sizes. The rocks were brought here without scratches or even the lichen being disturbed, by cradling them in a leather sling. The crane took a rock off the flatbed and put it where the architects wanted — they had the spot marked. Then the sling was taken off, the crane backed off, and the two architects, the head architect and his assistant, looked at it

for awhile and then they walked around the entire garden and looked at the rock from every vantage point in the entire garden. They beckoned the crane operator to come back and moved it three inches.

“It was such a contrast to the way we do things [today]. We have deadlines and we must do things quickly and be efficient. With them things were done with so much more

care; it was just absolute perfection, a totally different mentality.”

The Nikka Yuko garden took 21 months to build and cost \$275,000. It was officially opened on July 14, 1967, by Prince and Princess Takamatsu, the brother and sister-in-law of Japan’s Emperor Hirohito.

Christou hasn’t stopped photographing the garden in the three



TRINA SKJEI

left: Ginnala maple, mugo pine, Savin juniper, creeping blue juniper, Russian olive, white spruce and Scotch pine provide contrasting colour and texture with foliage alone.

top: In August 1965, a “pebble picking picnic” along the banks of the Oldman River near Monarch provided bushels of flat stones for the ariso beach.

above: Dry Garden: stones and sand represent mountains, islands, rivers and ocean, the starkness engenders a meditative state.



top: Peonies: the exquisite fast-fading peony suggests the fleeting quality of beauty and youth.
above: Black, hard, enduring rock and white, soft, ephemeral snow.
right: The bronze Friendship Bell, cast in Japan in 1965, is inscribed with the names of those who built the garden. When the suspended log is pushed to ring the bell, the tone can be heard three miles away.

decades since. “I bothered them so much that they gave me a key to the garden which I still have and I can go in anytime. It’s the single thing in our community, in the City of Lethbridge, of true excellence. It’s been done with the greatest care and there’s something special about that.”

A Japanese garden does not imitate nature like an English country

garden; nor does it impose a design on nature like a formal French garden. Rather, it interprets nature so we might meditate on the opposed forces governing the universe.

The elements of the Nikka Yuko garden — water, rocks, trees, path, bridges, lanterns, a stone pagoda, tea pavilion and bell — are symbolic. Lanterns are placed in the darkest corners to symbolize the

light of hope; the path forks to symbolize the choices one must make in life. In the walled area known as the dry garden, stones and sand represent mountains, islands, rivers and ocean.

The simplicity of the dry garden engenders calm. Zen teaches that we arrive at happiness through contemplation and withdrawal from the frenzy of the world. An evening

stroll through the Nikka Yuko garden can bring a peace which affirms the wisdom of such insight. “Once you get inside, the noise from the outside world just seems to fall away,” says Tosh Kanashiro, the first on-site supervisor of the garden. “You get a different view of the scenery depending on where you stand in the garden. I guess life is a bit like that; if you change your

position, you look at things in a different way.”

Lethbridge photographer Van Christou was involved in establishing the Lethbridge Allied Arts Council and the University of Lethbridge — later serving as its chancellor. A retired orthodontist, he has recently published an exquisite collection of his Alberta photographs: Land of Shining Mountains.

